

Malcolm Saville

Rye Royal



**A LONE PINE
ADVENTURE**

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Rye Royal

Malcolm Saville

Armada

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I acknowledge, with thanks, help given to me by Mr. Jim Foster of Adams of Rye, Ltd., the author of a local Guide Book which he has also called 'Rye Royal.' I am also grateful to the County Archivist of the East Sussex Record Office at Lewes, who has shown me several documents written in Rye during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

Foreword

Even if you have never read any of the other adventures of the boys and girls who founded the Lone Pine Club, and who are now known in many parts of the world as the Lone Piners, you will find this story complete in itself.

All the Lone Piners' adventures are set in parts of Britain which you can visit yourself. The setting of this story is the Sussex town of Rye on the edge of Romney Marsh and the time is now. I have known Rye all my life, and those who come to it for the first time are at once aware that there is no other town like it in Britain. Rye is indeed curiously un-English and this may be because it is one of the ancient Cinque Ports which in the Middle Ages were responsible for our sea defence and were the cradle of the British Navy. Rye was frequently attacked by the French and quick to defend itself and retaliate. It was certainly used a great deal by the smuggling gangs particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries when brandy and lace were brought in from France and wool from the Marsh sheep was smuggled out.

Today, you can explore the narrow streets and winding courts and alleys of this ancient town which was dubbed 'Rye Royal' by the first Queen Elizabeth when she visited the town in 1573. Hundreds of years before this royal visit, the marshes, now so peaceful and fertile, were once covered by the sea which washed the town's walls. Nowadays Rye is crowded with tourists and artists in the spring and summer months. But it becomes its true self again when they have gone and the seasonal south-westerly gales roar up the Channel and the waves thunder on the shingle beach and sea wall a mile or more away.

Because I am writing about a real place, I must explain that everyone in the story is imaginary and has no reference to any living person. There is no hotel called *The Gay Dolphin* and certainly no secondhand bookshop called *Rye Royal*. There are no streets called Trader's Street or Landgate Street and no Holford Court. But if you go to Rye on the Saturday nearest to November 5th you will certainly see the famous 'Rye Fawkes Pageant' with its torchlight procession which winds through the narrow streets and under

the old Landgate down to the town Salts where a boat is burned according to ancient custom. As to the 'treasure' and its hiding place, there is no doubt that both are possible in a town like Rye Royal.

Readers who are acquainted with the earlier adventures will find in this story that, with the exception of the Morton twins, the Lone Piners have grown a little older. They are old enough now to behave with courage, integrity and a sense of duty, and realize how much they mean to each other. I hope you will enjoy their latest adventure at Rye.

M.S.

The Lone Pine Club

The Lone Pine Club was founded as a secret society at a lonely house called Witchend in a hidden valley of the Long Mynd in Shropshire. The first headquarters of the Club was a clearing, marked by a solitary pine tree, on the slopes of this valley. The original rules of the Club are very simple and are set out in full in 'Mystery at Witchend', which is the first story about the Lone Piners and was written over twenty years ago.

There are now nine members of the Lone Pine Club, but it is not usual for them all to appear in one story. The following appear in this one: -

JONATHAN (JON) WARRENDER - Age 18, only son of Mrs. Warrender who owns the *Gay Dolphin*. Is in his first year at Sussex University.

PENELOPE (PENNY) WARRENDER Age 17. Jon's cousin. Has just left school and is now attending Domestic Science College at Hastings. She lives at the *Gay Dolphin* as her parents are abroad. She is devoted to Jon.

DAVID MORTON - Nearly 18. Has also just left school and lives and works in London. He is the captain and co-founder of the Lone Pine Club.

RICHARD (DICKIE) AND MARY MORTON - David's ten-year-old twin brother and sister.

PETRONELLA (PETER) STERLING - Age 17. Now works in a Shropshire riding stable. Was really the founder of the Lone Pine Club. She first met the Mortons when they bought a house called *Witchend* close to where she was then living. Has no mother but lives now with her father at *Witchend*. Nobody in her life like David.

MACBETH - The Morton's Scottie dog.

The other members are: -

TOM INGLES & JENNY HARMAN - who live in Shropshire.

HARRIET SPARROW - a special friend of the twins, who lives in London.

1. Royal's Visitors

This adventure begins, as so many do, with the arrival of an unexpected visitor. The scene is the narrow, cobbled street named after the ancient Landgate in the town of Rye in Sussex, Crowning the hill to which the town clings is a noble church with an unusual sixteenth-century clock set in the north tower. During the tourist season there are invariably a few people watching this clock because it is flanked by two gilded figures five feet high and carved from Sussex oak. At each quarter of each hour, except the hour itself, these "quarter boys" strike their bells as they have been doing for nearly four hundred years.

On a September evening, when the sun was gilding the weather-vane on the pinnacle surmounting the tower, the two cherubic figures struck the last quarter before six. As the last notes died, a man stepped from the shadows of the narrow doorway of a half-timbered house in Landgate Street, not far away. Above the leaded window of the shop behind him was inscribed in old English lettering:

Rye Royal for Books and Prints

And beneath, even more discreetly:

Proprietor Roy Royal

Mr. Royal, aged about forty-five, was thin and balding with a small goatee beard, and behind his steel-rimmed spectacles his eyes were bright and intelligent. He was neatly dressed in a grey tweed suit and a white-spotted red tie. He had come to Rye only six months ago and lived alone in the rooms above the shop which was already becoming quite well known. The woman who worked for him a few hours daily was well paid and had nothing but praise for his quiet and gentlemanly ways, and had let it be known that he could cook for himself and worked hard packing and unpacking parcels of books and banging away on the typewriter in his little office at the back of the shop. So Rye had more or less accepted him, although his one daring innovation was a big surprise and had caused some

criticism. The town was used to strangers trying to make a living out of tourists, but the idea of opening the cellars beneath the shop as a coffee bar primarily for young people who wanted a quiet place to meet and talk was regarded as ridiculous. Royal called this the Book Cellar and it had a side entrance at the bottom of some stone steps in an alley for use when the shop itself was closed. After a difficult start, the Cellar began to be appreciated, and although it showed no signs of being a financial success, Royal evidently considered it a worthwhile advertisement. It certainly brought some young people into the shop as well and there was no doubt that in his quiet, eccentric way, he was an agreeable and knowledgeable man with a gift for getting on with other people.

Royal employed nobody else in the shop and opened and closed it as he liked. His regular customers realized that he often had to travel to inspect other people's libraries and so sometimes was forced to close the shop and the Cellar.

And so, on this beautiful evening, after a satisfactory day, he stepped out into the pale sunshine. Landgate Street was narrow and never busy with traffic. None of the old houses had garages and Royal had to keep his Mini-van in a car park at the foot of the hill. This did not worry him. The people who came for expert advice and to buy beautiful books and old pictures and prints were usually in no hurry and did not fuss if they could not park directly outside Rye Royal.

A black cat minced across the cobbles and rubbed its head against his legs. Royal, who was wondering whether he would now close up and go to the Gay Dolphin for his evening meal, stooped to stroke it as an enormous car slid round the corner at the end of the street and glided towards him. He lifted the cat and stepped back into his doorway. The car was undoubtedly American, and as Royal had for long realized that American tourists usually had far more to spend than any others, he wondered whether this was a chance to tempt the occupants of the outsize and rather vulgar vehicle to step into Rye Royal.

So, still holding the cat in his arms, he smiled a welcome at the man behind the steering wheel who had his window down and was looking at him enquiringly. Royal's guess was correct. There was no doubt of this man's

nationality even before he spoke. He was wearing a cream linen suit and blue silk shirt and a garish bow tie. He was clean shaven, and as he stopped the car and smiled with a flash of very white teeth, Royal caught a whiff of his shaving lotion. Big, dark sun-spectacles hid his eyes.

"Say, friend!" he drawled. "I'm looking for a guy called Royal who runs a bookshop and I reckon I've just struck lucky. The name is over your head, mister, and I've a notion you're the feller I've come a long way to see. Is your name Royal and if that's so are you ready to talk business?"

"You are correct, sir. My name is Royal, this is my shop and I am invariably ready to discuss business. If you are interested in old books and the like I shall be happy to show you some of my treasures if you can spare the time. I was about to lock the shop door, but I live here and am at your service. May I ask if this is your first visit to Rye? It is at its best at this time of year when our streets are not too crowded."

The large man beamed at him and extended his hand. "Shake, Mr. Royal. I'm right glad to make your acquaintance. Harry K. Purvis is the name... Purvis of Chicago. And you've guessed right, Mr. Royal. This is my vurry first visit to your famous Rye and I would like some words with you."

Royal put down the cat and suggested tactfully that the car, now blocking Landgate Street, must be parked elsewhere while they talked. He was invited to get into what seemed to him to be a luxurious drawing-room on wheels and to pilot them to the safety of a public car park. As they strolled back together Royal felt optimistic. He knew that his shop was now talked about. He neither bought nor sold rubbish, and knew that rich Americans with money to burn were always ready to buy genuine antiques, old books, documents of historical interest as well as old silver and, particularly just at present, Victorian jewellery. This man might well be of value to him but Royal, who had met flamboyant Americans before, was sure that he would strike a hard bargain. He must play his cards carefully.

When they got back to the shop a woman was waiting on the doorstep. Under her arm was a badly tied parcel, and there was an anxious look in her eyes that confirmed Royal's suspicions that she had come to sell a few worthless books. Mr. Purvis swept off his hat, but before Royal could

explain that his shop was now closed the old lady broke into nervous speech.

"Good evening! I do trust that if one of you is Mr. Royal you will spare me a few moments. I tried the door but fear it is locked... You are Mr. Royal? Yes, of course. You must forgive me for not knowing you although we are fellow citizens. I come out now only rarely, but I have here a few books which I think may interest you. Not from my dear husband's library, of course. That is exceptional. Very exceptional. Dr. Flowerdew is a historian, Mr. Royal, and he has many, many treasures... What I have brought you this evening however is a selection from my own collection. I no longer have room for my own books. I must dispose of some and I was told that you sometimes purchase books which are surplus to the owner's present requirements. Is that so, Mr. Royal? Would you be kind enough to relieve me of this parcel as I find it beyond my strength? Trader's Street is not very far but I confess that I found the journey quite arduous... Thank you *very* much. Will your friend excuse us for just a few moments because I must hurry back to my husband? He is not at all well. That is why I want to give him a surprise with what you are going to pay me for these books, Mr. Royal."

Royal was annoyed but there was not much he could do about it, because Mr. Purvis genially suggested that if he would unlock the shop door he could browse around while he attended to the "little lady".

"Don't mind me, Mr. Royal, I've got all night and I'm much looking forward to a chat with you later, I was never the man to stand in the way of somebody else's business. 'Business is what makes the world go round' is my motto."

So Royal unlocked the door and warned his two companions that there were two stairs down into the shop. He led the way and it was then that the string of Mrs. Flowerdew's parcel broke and a dozen books fell to the stone floor. He kept his temper and picked them up because he remembered that somebody had told him about the eccentric couple with the odd name who lived in Trader's Street. This beautiful old street was one of the attractions of Rye. At the far end was the famous Gay Dolphin hotel and it was said that this, and virtually every other house in the street, had been used by

smugglers. He also remembered that Dr. Flowerdew was ill and that the old couple who could have sold the house very well were now said to be exceedingly poor. He switched on the light and looked again at the neat little woman standing hopefully before him. Her clothes were unfashionable, her shoes, although polished, were old and cracked, and as she lifted her hand nervously to her greying hair he noticed that her fingers were worn with work. These were people who were feeling the pinch. It might be wise to cultivate Mrs. Flowerdew because her husband's library - and perhaps some other accumulated treasures - would be worth investigating. And as they were undoubtedly poor, the old man might be easily persuaded to sell. There might well be books in a historian's library which a man like Mr. Harry K. Purvis would be glad to buy.

So Royal smiled at Mrs. Flowerdew and brought forward a chair for her.

"Of course I understand the situation, Mrs. Flowerdew. Certainly I will make you an offer for these books, although they are not quite the sort of literature that is in demand just now... Let me see now... Ah, yes. A complete Victorian edition of Tennyson's verse. Interesting but not rare. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Black Beauty*. Quite so... But what is this? A calf-bound edition of Lamb's *Essays of Elia*."

"I do so hope they will be of value, Mr. Royal. I don't want to press the point and am reluctant to mention any specific sum, but my husband is alone - truth to tell he was enjoying a little nap when I left - and I must get back to him now. He did not know that I was going out you see..."

Royal looked at her gravely. Was it possible that she really believed that these old books were of value? Was she really living so out of the world?

He took out his wallet and passed her a note. "I am sorry to disappoint you, but your books are not of much value, Mrs. Flowerdew. Nevertheless, this is an agreeable little edition of Lamb's *Essays*. I will take it and the others for one pound. I am sorry I cannot offer you more."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Royal. I had no idea they would be worth so much. Now I must be on my way... Good evening."

He escorted her up the two steps and as she was putting the money in her shabby handbag he said: "I am sure I should find your husband's library of great interest, Mrs. Flowerdew. I know something of his reputation, of course, and when he is better I should esteem it an honour to inspect it. Would you be kind enough to mention it to him? And of course he would always be welcome here. I have a few treasures which I think he would appreciate."

She snapped her bag shut.

"That would not be possible, Mr. Royal. My husband is not well enough to see anybody or to go out and he would *never* allow any stranger to see his library nor are any of his books for sale. Only this morning he repeated this so please do not mention it again."

Mr. Royal shrugged his displeasure.

"As you please, Mrs. Flowerdew. Should your husband ever change his mind please let me know. Have I your address? Of course, it will be in the Telephone Directory. Forgive me."

"I did not give you my address and my husband does not approve of the telephone. We are not connected to it. You are a newcomer to Rye, I believe, and so you would not know that Dr. Flowerdew has lived for over forty years at thirty-nine Trader's Street, next to the Gay Dolphin hotel. Good evening."

When Royal turned round, Mr. Purvis was standing in the doorway. He must have overheard this conversation and there was a glint of amusement in the dark eyes behind the heavy horn-rimmed spectacles which he had substituted for his sun-glasses.

"Say, Mr. Royal, from what I heard that was not a vurry profitable transaction. A very odd little lady. Reckon you would think me impertinent if I asked you how you can make a living from such customers? You've got some good books here and I like the look of the little place. I've got dollars to spend, mister, but I guess I like value for them. Show me what you have got to sell."

Royal re-locked the shop door and followed him.

"If you've got half an hour or so I am at your service, Mr. Purvis. It is a pleasure to meet a cultivated and appreciative customer. I have not been here many months, but although this is a small town it is prosperous. Many of Rye's citizens are cultured people and I am also making special efforts to gain the interest of young people. Many of your own countrymen come to Rye, and fortunately for me they have dollars to spend as you pointed out just now. It is for me to find them what they want... May I ask who gave you my name?"

Harry K. Purvis sat down behind the table at the back of the shop and lit a cigar. Royal did not smoke and disliked the smell of tobacco, but he was a little surprised that the American did not offer him his case.

"You may ask me, sir, but I cannot now recall who is spreading your fame... 'Go to a little town called Rye,' some feller said. 'Find a real quaint little bookshop called Rye Royal. Owner calls himself Royal too and he's got some worthwhile goods. Ask to see them...' That's what he said, mister. Show me what you've got. Royal is not your real name, I guess?"

In an odd, unexplainable way the atmosphere in the shop seemed to have changed. Royal sensed that his visitor was not quite as friendly. The way in which he had taken his own chair and lit a cigar showed a lack of courtesy, and there was a ring of authority in his last question.

"Say, mister-whatever-your-name-is. What made you think of calling yourself Royal? Did you reckon it tied up with calling the shop after the town? Reckon it makes for good business, eh? No need to look put out, mister. Just a little joke of mine, I guess. Have you got any old prints of Rye? Any old books about the town? Got any old documents or letters written by the Huguenots when they came here to escape having their throats cut in France? And smugglers' notes and lists? And what about that first Queen Elizabeth of yours? She came to Rye didn't she?"

Royal looked at him with respect. What Purvis wanted was exactly the sort of thing for which he was always looking. Such evidences of past history were always saleable and profitable, but there was not much he had to offer

now except some old prints and a copy of an old history of Rye. This visit of Queen Elizabeth to the town in 1573 had never been adequately recorded, and Royal was aware that for years historians had been hoping that more evidence would be discovered.

"Never mind about your name right now, mister," the American went on. "I see that you are also interested in the Elizabethan visit. So am I and I'm thinking we might do some business together... Show me what you've got right now and then maybe we could do some real talking."

Royal was thoughtful as he went to a cabinet and brought out a portfolio of old prints and engravings which he put before his visitor. The latter chose four, and the bookseller was not surprised that his visitor had unerringly selected the most valuable. Next he produced one or two old books on Rye and the Cinque Ports but Purvis brushed these aside saying that he had them already.

"What's really got me guessing, Mr. Royal, is why you've chosen to settle down in so small a town. I wouldn't think this was your first business. I reckon you're a knowledgeable sort of guy, but you're not making much dough out of this outfit, are you? I heard what you and that old dame had to say to each other. I reckon you'd like to see over her old man's library, wouldn't you?"

Royal drew up another chair and sat down on the opposite side of his own table.

"I'm sorry I haven't got more to show you, Mr. Purvis, but I'm not sure what you really want. It may be worth your while to make a careful study of my stock, but as that would take some time it might be more convenient for you to return in the morning. The prints you have selected are four guineas each... Obviously it is my business to inspect as many private libraries as I can. If you'll leave me your address I'll be glad to send you details of anything about the Elizabethan visit that I have to offer. As you know - or I presume you do - there are very few old books about Rye although our town has had an interesting history. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Mr. Purvis puffed out a great gust of cigar smoke and laughed at him.

"Yes, Mister Royal, I reckon there is but I'm not sure whether you've got what I want right now and right here. I'm interested in you and your little business. I told you I'm a business man but I haven't told you yet that I came here today to get better acquainted with you. I wanted to be sure that Mr. Roy Royal of Rye was the feller I had in mind. The feller I'd heard of before. Care to tell me where you were before you settled in these parts, mister?"

Royal stepped back and tried to flap away the cigar smoke with his hands.

"Really, my dear sir, I must insist that my private affairs can be nothing to do with you, but I can show you in my ledgers a list of my customers and there are plenty who would vouch for my business dealings with them. Possibly you are not aware of how we do business in this country, but as apparently you are only interested in these four prints, you might care to write me a cheque and take them with you. It has been interesting to make your acquaintance and I'm obliged for your custom."

"Sit down, Royal," the other said brusquely. "Sit down and don't talk like that silly old dame who was here just now. Sit down and listen to me. I know your real name is not Royal. I know why you haven't been here long and I know a great deal more about you. I wasn't fooling when I said I'd got money to spend. I have, and I'm sure as can be that you have not. I'll take these prints but I'm interested in more than prints and rare books from England. I'm interested in anything from this country of historic value that will sell well on the other side of the Atlantic. I'm talking big money, mister. Really big. There's a market over there for anything that is rare. Small things like jewellery and miniatures and pictures - things that could be packed in a parcel of books by a bookseller with a connection in the United States... See what I mean?"

Royal did see. Only too well, and he was extremely uneasy although he tried not to show it.

"I don't think I do see, Mr. Purvis, but I must say that this is rather an extraordinary conversation. Just exactly what are you suggesting, sir?"

"I'm suggesting that you're behaving like a fool but I'll speak more plainly. I reckon you're in a position to do good business with me. By what you're telling me you're well enough established round these parts to make enquiries in houses of people who have valuable things to sell. Is that so?"

Royal nodded.

"Very well. I could save you a lot of marketing problems and pay you well if you can produce what I want. Are you ready to discuss possibilities right now while I'm here, or would you rather I came back after making more enquiries about Mr. Royal - late of Bedford?"

There was a long silence in the shop until Purvis dropped the still-smouldering butt of his cigar on the stone floor and ground it out with his heel.

Then, "Very well," Royal said quietly. "Let us discuss the possibilities of doing business together. My flat is upstairs. Perhaps you would care to join me in a glass of sherry wine?"

He led the way into his little office at the back of the shop and unlocked a door at the foot of a narrow staircase.

"This house is very old - undoubtedly sixteenth century," he said as he preceded his guest. "Kindly latch the door behind you."

The room which he used as a sitting-room had panelled walls and a beamed ceiling. The windows were small and diamond-paned but from them there was a good view in each direction of Landgate Street which was now in shadow as the sun went down. Purvis looked round appreciatively, noting two good pictures against the polished oak and a pair of fine silver candlesticks on a side table.

"You do yourself well, my friend," he drawled. "No doubt you've searched the place thoroughly for secret panels and hiding places for smuggled brandy and lace from France."

Royal poured two glasses of sherry from a cut glass decanter.

"Of course. I am satisfied that there is nothing hidden here... I hope you appreciate this sherry and I look forward to hearing your propositions."

This was not true. He was afraid of this man and what he knew about his past. He dared not show his true feelings until the other had disclosed his hand. There might just be a chance that he could make money out of Mr. Purvis as a selling agent in America. He might, if he played his cards carefully and dodged the awkward questions, even make use of this man who was certainly no harmless American tourist. The reference to Bedford could hardly have been a coincidence but he had to take a chance. He waited while the man lit another cigar and then went on:

"I take it, Mr. Purvis, that you are suggesting that in the course of my business travels and visits to suitable houses in the south of England, I may hear that somebody has something to sell which you would wish to buy and pay me a commission on the value of the goods."

"Not so, my friend. Not precisely so," Purvis replied as he gulped his sherry. "In the first instance you will provide me with the essential information regarding each prospect. With your experience and your skill in obtaining suitable introductions, it will be possible for you to examine the goods and satisfy yourself that they are genuine. You must realize that you cannot afford any errors of judgement. You will be of no use to me if you are wrong. The articles must be genuine and you would be very unwise to try fobbing me off with, shall we say *copies* of anything. It will obviously be important for you to know precisely where, in each house, the goods are kept and whether there are any special precautions taken to guard them. It would be unwise, in the first instance, to suggest to the owner that any cash offer is to be made. I may be able to help you in various ways to apprehend the goods but you, Mr. John Jones, will only receive your commission when the goods are in my hands. You are going to have to work very hard for your money, Johnnie."

The bookseller stared at him in horrified silence. Then he picked up the two sherry glasses and turned his back so that the other should not see how his hands were shaking. He knew now that the man who called himself Purvis was an enemy from the past and that he was no longer even pretending to be an American. He had proved now that he knew his real name - the name

under which he had once been convicted - and knew too that the police would almost certainly be glad to have other information about his past and indeed to know that he had settled in Rye.

He looked carefully at the man smiling at him as he sat at ease as if he was his guest. Royal was reasonably sure that he had never seen him before but he believed that he knew his identity. His name was not Purvis. He was not an American, but it was possible that he was one of the most notorious receivers of stolen goods in the country. And the man who now called himself Roy Royal of Rye was in his power.

2. Penny to Jon

132 Hamsey Rd.,
Hastings,
Sussex.

October 21st

Dearest Jon,

Funny to be writing to you when you're in your first term at University and I'm in my bed-sitter not so many miles away in my first term in this Domestic Science place. Not so really funny though because you don't deserve a letter. I know you telephoned the other day but it isn't funny trying to talk in the hall of this house with other people walking about and talking and being nosey. Anyway I was never any good on the beastly machine and don't waste your time being superior about that. I don't like the telephone. I prefer letters and I like actual people best of all. So I'm going to spoil you tonight by writing to you. It's over things like this that women are silly but I do think that even if you are far more involved with what your adorable mother calls your "new life" you might *just be friendly* and put pen to paper now and then. Not that I care desperately of course, but it would be good manners if you did write occasionally. My real reason for writing now is because your mother phoned just now and gave me some news. She seems to think that we correspond regularly and asked *me* to tell *you* because she's terribly busy at the Dolphin and she can't get you easily on the machine.

I propose to keep my promise to her and give you her news, but someone has just come barging in here and wants me to go to a coffee party presently. I shall go, and if necessary finish this letter tomorrow.

I suppose you know that I've been home to Rye for three week-ends, I miss the Dolphin. Fred Vasson is just the same. Must be the most wonderful hotel porter ever. Actually asked me about you last Sunday and I said how would I know? Your mother is looking tired and worried. I've been

wondering whether she's got any plans for the hotel when my parents come home. I don't know how interested you are but they may be here just after Christmas and my future is to be discussed! I feel rather peculiar about them. Sort of shy and scared which is silly. Excited of course because it will be wonderful to get to know them again. They approve this place for me for the present but I daren't tell them that I do find it a bit dim. All the other girls - except one or two like me - seem to take it all so seriously! Still, I suppose somebody some day will be glad that little Penny knows how to make a fruit cake. Sometimes, but not often, I wish I was really brainy like Jonathan W. who knows that he is. That's one of the differences between us - if I was "University material" I should be so amazed that I should keep quiet about it. Or should I? Maybe I'd like to be an undergraduate of Sussex like you. I could at least keep an eye on you. Do you go to parties every night? Or do you do a lot of protesting? If I ever protest about anything in this place it will be the meals which is a bit ironic.

I've half an hour before I go to my polite little party so I'd better tell you what your mother said. The first thing is that old Dr. Flowerdew died three days ago. We never really knew the old couple did we? Maybe you've been inside that number thirty-nine more often than I have but I can't remember saying "Good morning" or "Good evening" to the old man more than once or twice when he ventured out into Trader's Street. I think I was always rather scared of him. Once when I was sitting on our wall outside the Dolphin he actually came up and spoke to me, and I remember that he really smelled of old books. Anyway he died without any fuss in his sleep and your mother is very upset about it all because Mrs. Flowerdew whom I always thought was *definitely peculiar* is in a bad way and has gone very peculiar indeed. Your mum says that she has no friends or relations and that, as far as she can tell, the old couple were more or less penniless. I've noticed that "senior citizens" often get very mean but come to think of it Mrs. F. - whom I always considered to be an eccentric old sweetie - really did wear the most astonishing garments. Pre-the-last-war-but-one I shouldn't be surprised. Anyway it seems that your mother suggested that she shouldn't really be worrying about money in the future because she could sell thirty-nine in about a week for a small fortune. As you know Jonathan dear, a house in Trader's Street of all the streets in Rye is worth a lot of money. And although we can't be sure, we believe that the venerable

Doctor of some-thing-or-other had a very valuable library. He *looked* like a scholar, didn't he? I believe that your mother, who has been with the widow every day, helping and comforting her and making her eat and arranging the funeral which is tomorrow, told the old dear that she should now sell the big old house and go and live in comfort in a flat or a cottage. At this suggestion she fell into a sort of hysterical passion and begged her never to mention such a thing, because time and time again her husband had told her never to sell number thirty-nine. I can't think of anything more selfish - unless there's a reason that she doesn't know about for hanging on to the old place - than making the one who is left alone follow mysterious instructions which will add to her discomfort and unhappiness... But there I go again and I suppose it's nothing to do with us, except that your mother is sure that we have got to do something about Mrs. Flowerdew to help her through a tough time. This is her idea and it's a very clever one because it will help us all. Yes ALL - my darling aunt, the widow Flowerdew, and could be fun for us too. She suggests that she asks Mrs. F. if she will allow thirty-nine to be used as an annexe to the hotel over Christmas at least. Apparently the bookings for the Dolphin are heavy and there may not be enough bedrooms to go round. Mrs. F. refuses to go away but something like this might take her mind off things a bit if there was coming and going in her house. And of course, she would be paid a rent for her rooms by the Dolphin. Your mother insists that the old lady must not be left alone too much to fuss and *brood* and that this arrangement would give her an interest. But this isn't all. She says that if we like we might invite all the Mortons - parents as well if they can - but certainly David and the twins who won't come without Macbeth. You may have heard from David this term and know what they're up to. They may even have decided to go up to Witchend for the holiday so that David can see Peter. Peter isn't much of a one for writing letters either and I haven't heard from her since the summer. When I mentioned her to your mother she had another idea. She says that David might be able to persuade Peter to come down here too. She's never been to Rye, and although I could bear the thought of spending Christmas just with you at the Dolphin as we have before, I must say it would be wonderful to have David and Peter here as well. The twins, with that splendid dog of theirs should look after themselves anyway. Your mother says that there are lots of bedrooms never used in old thirty-nine and that between us we might feed ourselves there and treat Mrs. Flowerdew as a sort of guest in her own house. I hope you

won't be too sort of cool and blase about this idea. I'm in favour. It's not only very thoughtful of your mother, but taking the Mortons round the places we like so much would be fun, and if Peter and I find ourselves getting bored with our boy friends we shall discover lots of things to do together and discuss. You'd be surprised, actually.

If you're too exhausted to write to me, please telephone me here at six o'clock on the day you get this letter which, fool that I am, I intend to post first class mail. There aren't many people about that hour of the evening.

I shall have to go to my party soon, but I've got something else of interest to tell you about. You remember that nice new bookshop called *Rye Royal* in Landgate Street? We both liked it and the rather quaint character who runs it. Of course you remember because in a mad moment you bought me a gorgeous book about Sussex. Do you remember that Mr. Royal - it can't be his real name can it? - told us that he was going to open up his cellar under the shop as a coffee bar, mostly - but not exclusively - for intelligent bright young things like us? Well he's done it and it's definitely "on". He's a clever and a nice little man and he told me that he wants to make it a meeting place - particularly at night after he's closed the shop - for people who don't want "Pop" and fruit machines and all that sort of thing all the time. He's put in a record player with some decent records and there are papers about, although there's generally such a row that you'd have to plug your ears if you wanted to read. I've been helping with ideas at the week-ends I've been home - don't get it into your head that I'm bored without you - and been down there each Saturday evening. I like Royal because he doesn't stooze around and try to run it himself after asking us to help him. If enough of us are interested and turn up, he'll leave it to us entirely to serve coffee and take the cash etc. There's a separate entrance from that alley at the side of the shop and, of course, stairs down from his office. He's put in an extension of the shop telephone. I must admit it gets a bit turgid down there from one of those heaters in the ceiling, but there's about a dozen using it at present and I think it's enterprising and will eventually bring Royal some extra business. Your mother likes the little man too. He comes up to the Dolphin sometimes for lunch or dinner, and I like him because he knows about interesting things like books and pictures and music and talks to you as if you weren't ignorant. I shall certainly go on helping him on Saturday

evenings and I don't think you'll be bored there either. I hope you like him too. He goes off quite a lot to buy books and things from houses in Kent and Sussex in his Mini van. Now I must go to my party. I'll add more tomorrow because there's something else I must mention if there's not a letter from you in the morning.

Next day

No letter and I'm disappointed in you. It's just a matter of common courtesy to keep in touch with me. So, I'll humiliate myself by reminding you that next Saturday week is Nov. 2nd and the night of Rye's famous Bonfire celebrations. Do you realize that because we were both always away at school we've never seen this show? Of course you don't. You've never even thought of it. I was going to ask you to get leave or whatever you call it and to come home for that week-end. There's nothing like the Rye Fawkes Celebrations in all England. There's a procession and torches and bands and tableaux and fancy dress and a fantastic fireworks display on the Salts down there by the river, and then a bonfire as high as a house. You *must* know about this, Jon. Don't you remember that they burn a boat every year as well as the fire itself? *And we've never seen it!* Come and take me, Jon. It will be something new for us to do together. Come in here by train on the Saturday morning and I'll be waiting and we can go on together on the bus as we've done lots of times in the old days. Will you do that?

Later - same day

I'm sorry, dear Jon! I really am. Because I'm too busy to write the first part of this letter over again I'll send it just as I wrote it. I was disappointed because you hadn't written, but your wonderful letter which came second post makes up for everything. I know you've been busy and are busy, and I suppose I'm a bit jealous because everything is suddenly so different - so strange too. I understand, and thank you for all the wonderful things you say about us. Here was I being scratchy about you and thinking you didn't care and then you put everything right and the nicest thing of all was that you've suggested Bonfire Night too and didn't even know that I was going to ask you. I'm glad you've spoken to your mother. She works too hard and as you've now heard she is getting into a fuss about Mrs. Flowerdew whom we must certainly help if we can. Maybe things will have settled down a bit

by Saturday week. O.K. We'll talk about the Mortons when we meet then. Perhaps they will have fixed something up by now but I think it would be fun to have them if the twins amuse themselves most of the time.

Wonderful, wonderful idea to get a lift in your friend's car. As he lives in Hastings you can introduce me and then if he's here sometimes when I am, perhaps he would like to amuse me during the long winter evenings? I do hope so. I promise that I would do you credit.

Thank you again for your lovely letter. Yes. I do miss you. I'm sometimes homesick for the Dolphin and now my parents will soon be here I've got an odd sort of feeling that everything is changing. Don't change faster than I do, Jon. Please, don't do that. No, I don't think you'll change about us. I never shall.

See you Saturday week. Ten o'clock in the morning at the East Kent bus stop at White Rock. I'll be waiting so don't be late.

Love, as always,

Penny.

3. Rye Fawkes

At ten o'clock on the Saturday morning of Rye's Bonfire celebrations, Penny was waiting on the parade at Hastings opposite the bus stop. She was excited and looking very attractive in her green cloak and high black boots. The wind from the sea stirred her russet hair as she leaned on the rail and looked across to the sullen waves breaking on the shingle and the gulls wheeling effortlessly above the surf.

It was a sad, grey morning. No sun. Not many people about. The sort of day on which you waited for something to happen. Penny knew what she was waiting for. For Jon, whom she had not seen for nearly five weeks and who had, after all, written her a letter which had warmed her heart with happiness and whom she would see again in about three minutes... if he was punctual.

She turned her back to the sea and looked to the left. Perhaps it would be difficult for him to get here precisely at ten. He was often vague about times and dates but she had realized long ago that she must put up with such irritating ways.

Now he was late and the bus to Rye was due to leave in fifteen minutes. He had probably forgotten that she had said ten o'clock or had lost her letter. Probably his friend had let him down. Some men made easy promises which they forgot to keep. Not Jon of course, but he should have come by train instead of relying on somebody else to keep an important appointment.

She returned to the contemplation of the gulls. They were still hungry and the sea still looked grey and cold. The thing to do, of course, was to count up to a hundred before looking round again. Sometimes, after several such counts, what you hoped for came true. She had played this game for years and sometimes it worked. When she was younger and before her parents went away and left her in the care of Jon's mother, she told her father, who had caught her at it and was very sympathetic, that counting up to a hundred like this gave God a chance to answer her prayer. So she closed her eyes and counted slowly in her head while grasping the railing with great

concentration. At eighty-nine a gull squawked almost on her shoulder but she was not put off. At one hundred she turned and looked hopefully across the road. The bus had arrived and the time was twelve minutes past the hour. There was no car parked near the bus.

Perhaps if she went for a walk while counting 200 something might happen? Jon would arrive of course and would not know where she was and that would be ridiculous. Should she go on the bus to Rye without him? She was only temporarily tempted because that would be an impetuous Penny-like, idiotic thing to do. So she took another brief glance at the English Channel, closed her eyes and started again. At seventy-three her prayer was answered surprisingly and satisfactorily.

A hand grasped her shoulder and swung her round and the voice she'd been longing to hear said, "What's the matter with you, sweetie? In a trance? Have you taken up meditation? Your eyes were shut and you were muttering... Yes, you were. Wasn't she, Henry? Well, maybe you didn't notice but she invariably looks intelligent."

She felt the colour in her cheeks as she looked up at them and laughed.

"I was meditating on your bad manners. You've kept me waiting and if you'll look over there you'll see that our bus is now on its way. Have you both walked from Brighton?"

Jon grinned cheerfully. Now that he had arrived she could see that he had not changed. Same old duffle coat and cord trousers. Polo-necked blue sweater. Shabby suede boots, tousled fair hair, spectacles with one side still held together with adhesive plaster. Then she glanced at his companion who was looking at her with friendly admiration. He was certainly smoother than Jon and wearing much more expensive clothes. Dark with a sweep of black hair across his forehead. Very white teeth as he smiled and held out his hand.

"I'm Henry Carter. Blame me for not allowing enough time. Sorry, Penny. Forgiven? Please forgive. I'm a nice chap really and have been plotting to meet you for a long time. Shall we go and have a coffee or a little

something? Don't worry about East Kent Road Services. I've just decided that I'm going to take you both to Rye in my car."

She shook hands. "But you live here, don't you? In Hastings, I mean. We can catch the next bus, can't we, Jon? And where is your car?"

"That is the point, Penelope," Jon explained. "The car is two hundred yards away in a parking place. You had forgotten that it is against the law to park at a bus stop. We didn't see you on the pavement as we passed so we went a little farther and parked the M.G. and walked back to find you... Good idea, Henry. Let's drink coffee, and although we'd like you to see the Dolphin and meet my Mum we can easily catch the next bus."

"I've an idea about our journey to Rye," Henry said as he took Penny's arm. "Coffee first which will give me an opportunity of getting to know Miss Warrender."

They spent an enjoyable half-hour in a cafe. Penny liked being spoiled by two men. Jon was obviously proud of her and Henry had a quick wit.

As they were walking to the car park, Henry said, "As Jon has got a driving licence he might as well drive us to Rye. I trust my car to you, comrade. No. Don't protest. You drive and I'll sit in the back seat with Penny while you keep your eye on the road. You agree, Penny? You'd like a change, wouldn't you? This will be a change for all of us. A change for you to sit in the back seat with Henry and get to know him better. A change for Henry to relax with Penny whose beauty and charm is having an agreeable effect on him and a change for Jon not to be selfish about her and to drive an M.G."

So Jon drove skilfully through Hastings Old Town and up the hill towards Fairlight and then down to the old familiar villages of Guestling and Icklesham, the names of which always brought back happy memories to the Warrenders. The road had been widened since they had first travelled into Hastings on the bus from Rye in the school holidays, but the views across to the high hills above the sea to the south, and the ancient woods and pastures inland were still the same. And so they came to Winchelsea still dreaming on its hill - Rye's sister Cinque Port which the sea has also deserted. Jon drove past the ruin of the old windmill and Penny found herself telling

Henry of the first adventure in which she and Jon and their other friends had played a big part (*The Gay Dolphin Adventure*). To her surprise he did not laugh at her and as Jon turned the car carefully through the great Strand Gate and went slowly down the steep hill she told Henry to look across the green levels on their right to where a row of bungalows broke the skyline. "Have you ever been to Winchelsea Beach, Henry? That's where the sea broke through that day and now they've built a great wall to keep it out. Since that happened there's a big caravan park and it's not the same. We saw the sea come up across the marsh again, right up to this hill, just as it must have done hundreds of years ago."

Jon stopped the car.

"Would you two mind if I took some part in this conversation? I'm sure it's cosy in the back there but I'm tired of being a chauffeur. I'm put out. Penny hasn't realized yet how sensitive I am. Always have been. I'm an only child and I don't like being ignored. Change over, Henry. I want to sit next to my girl."

And he did. Henry took the wheel without protest, and Jon put his arm round Penny's shoulders. Neither of them said anything until they reached Rye and it was necessary to direct Henry up Lion Street and past the church into Trader's Street.

"There's no way through our street, Henry," Jon said. "You can see the sign of the Dolphin now. Turn into the yard under the arch if you like, or park against that wall at the end of the street if there's room. Thanks for the ride. Come in and see the place and meet my mother."

Henry winked at Penny as he helped her out of the car and then, in some surprise, realized that she was not even noticing him. Her eyes were on Jon until Mrs. Warrender came out of the hotel to greet them. Henry liked her at once because she made him welcome and asked him to come in and see the Dolphin, but he sensed that neither Jon nor Penny was particularly keen. Henry could be charming when he liked, and although he had been flirting with Penny he made polite excuses and explained that he must get back to Hastings at once. As he turned the car, Penny ran out into the road.

"We've never thanked you properly, Henry. I've got an idea. Why don't you come over to Rye tonight - bring some friends - and see the 'burning of the boat' down on the Salts. It's a wonderful night for Rye and if you can't find us let's all meet at the Book Cellar in Landgate Street when it's over. Mr. Royal told me that he's going to open it after the celebration. Will you come?"

"Why not?" Jon agreed. "Penny says this coffee bar is quite a place. If we're bored there we needn't stay. You'll find it easily enough. It's under a secondhand book shop called Rye Royal. Penny works there sometimes."

"So I will," Henry said. "I'll bring a party maybe. Good-bye, Mrs. Warrender. Be seeing you, Jon. As for you, Penelope, you've changed my life. Be good till I come back again with the fireworks."

He let in the clutch and the red car roared off down Trader's Street and turned the corner by the church with a triumphant hoot.

"Nice young man, but rather breathless," Mrs Warrender said as she went indoors. "Whose friend is he?"

"He *was* mine," Jon smiled. "He's after Penny now but he'll get over it and so will she. How's my Mum?"

They lunched together in Mrs. Warrender's private room and when she had poured their coffee she gave them her news.

"I've a lot to tell you. First, Penny darling, news from your parents. They have decided to fly home rather than come by sea and hope to be here on Christmas Day or just after, so this looks like being the happiest Christmas we have had for years. You can see the letter presently but I really think that we are going to be a united family at last."

Penny's hands were clasped so tightly in her lap that the knuckles were white.

"Where will they stay? In the Dolphin?"

"Yes. They must come here. We shall probably be full up for Christmas, but I shall keep the best rooms for them... Now I have to tell you something that I couldn't mention before because we hadn't made up our minds. You must both have guessed that the Dolphin is getting too much for me. I enjoy it, but you two won't be here for ever and so Penny, my love, your father and mother have decided to make a partnership of three and we shall run this together. We can manage this and I hope - the others don't know this yet - that eventually we can extend by taking over thirty-nine next door. This is what I hope, but there are difficulties which I'll tell you about later. Whether or not we can persuade poor old Mrs. Flowerdew to part with a house which is nothing but a burden to her, I don't yet know. What you must both understand is that whether or not we get her old house quickly the partnership is not affected. Do you understand what this means? The Dolphin is going to be our home - the home of all the Warrenders. The hotel will go on whatever happens, but we can't make a final decision until we know where we are with Mrs. Flowerdew. Do you like the idea?"

Penny stretched her hand across the table.

"We like it if it's what you want. Jon and I know how hard you've been working and it's wonderful for my father and mother to live here too."

"And you, Jon? Do you approve?"

"Of course. But you won't really have room for us all - and that means Penny and me when we're not being educated - unless you do a deal with the widow Flowerdew, will you? Your idea about eventually taking over those premises next door makes sense but it will cost a lot, won't it? And I suppose you don't feel that you can hustle the old lady. You're concerned about her aren't you, Mother? Penny and I were saying that we never really knew either of the Flowerdews."

"Yes. I am concerned about her. Even if we hadn't had this idea about the house I should be worried because I seem to be her only friend. I must tell you more about her, because I want you both to help her as well. She is behaving in a most peculiar way and sometimes talks to me as if her husband were still alive. None of us knew him properly because they rarely went out together, and although I've been in thirty-nine every day since he

died and done what I could to help, I cannot make her see that there is no need for her to worry about money. Honestly, I've doubted sometimes if she is having enough to eat. She just doesn't bother."

"But how do you know that she's really short of money, Mother? She was always odd and maybe she's just mean. Are you fussing about her more than you need?"

"Not really, Jon. She's pathetic, and when I've tactfully suggested once or twice that she should give herself a little more comfort, she just says very firmly, 'Oh, no, dear. We can't afford that!' I know she is still shocked over her husband's death, but although he was eccentric, he couldn't possibly wish her to go on living alone in that house until she dies. She ought to go away after Christmas, but she's quite excited about having some of our guests there and has accepted the idea that the Dolphin pays a rent for the rooms."

"That's something helpful," Penny agreed. "I've never known what the old man did. And do we know whether he has left everything to her or are there some horrid complications?"

"The lawyer has already told her that the house and everything it contains is left to her, but she has said more than once that her husband did not wish her to sell the house... I don't know exactly what he was but I believe he once had a name as an historian. He's probably written some books... And that reminds me, Penny. She told me this morning that your friend Mr. Royal, who bought a few books from her before her husband died, because she was short of ready money, is being a nuisance. She says that he keeps nagging her to show him her husband's library and this is something she will not do. I was allowed to look in there once as a favour and it's a fine old room on the ground floor well furnished and lined with books from floor to ceiling. But she won't let anyone else see it and she keeps the door locked and carries the key around with her. She is angry with the harmless Mr. Royal just because he tries to persuade her to let him see it."

"But of course he's interested in old books," Penny insisted. "It's his job to buy and sell and I'm sure he would be very polite about asking her."

"Looks as if there's something valuable in there," Jon said. "I wonder if Mrs. Flowerdew knows what it is and is scared to let anybody see it. Does she know anything about old books and that sort of thing? Maybe the old boy was a collector? I smell a mystery here but it isn't anything to do with us, is it?"

"Of course not, except that I know she's genuinely grateful for what little I've done to help her. I hate the idea of her being alone in that house day and night, brooding over the past and, every time she leaves it, locking the room in which her husband spent most of his life."

"But she's agreed to let you have rooms for Christmas, Mother. What are you worrying about?"

Mrs. Warrender went over to the window.

"Not really worried. I hate to hear the excuses she makes for not spending a little money to make herself more comfortable. I believe that old man may have been collecting valuable books and documents and other treasures for years. She doesn't want them and doesn't even understand their value, and yet she maintains that her husband didn't want her to sell the house and that, at present, she won't consider selling anything to help herself... She really is very odd but you might both go and see her presently and cheer her up. I've asked her to come in here tonight. She can watch the procession from the end of Trader's Street if she's interested, but I'll look after her anyway and give her one good meal. I was surprised when she agreed to come. Actually, she was quite gracious in the way she accepted."

Penny went over to her aunt and took her arm.

"Of course we'll go and see her. You won't mind if Jon takes me to see the procession and the burning of the boat, will you?"

"Of course not! I was sure that's what you would want to do and that you'd probably be going down to Rye Royal after. I met Mr. Royal yesterday and in his courtly way he asked if Penelope would be home this week-end and able to help him tonight. I said I thought you would so you had better let him know... Now I've some news for you and a letter from David Morton

which was enclosed with mine from his mother this morning... Yes, David and the twins will come but their parents have arranged to go to Torquay as Mrs. Morton has been ill and they've already booked. Read your letter and you'll see that David wants to ask that nice girl Petronella. You've told me about her and you'd like her to come, wouldn't you?"

David's letter was not long and Penny read it over her cousin's shoulder.

"He's written to Peter and thinks she'd love to come if her father isn't left alone. They would all have gone to Witchend if Mrs. Morton hadn't been ill. You remember, Auntie, that Peter and her father used to live in a cottage called Hatchholt by the reservoir he looked after. Mr. Sterling has retired now and the Mortons asked him and Peter to live in Witchend and look after their house for them. It's a wonderful idea because it's not so isolated, and Mr. Sterling has a brother in Hereford and often goes there. I'm sure he'll let Peter come. The others can't. Tom can't leave his uncle's farm and Jenny helps her father quite a bit in the holidays and it's not likely she'll come without Tom anyway. Thank you for asking them all, and now we'll go and see Mrs. Flowerdew and then I'll show Jon the Book Cellar."

The afternoon light was fading when they knocked on the door of thirty-nine which was a shabby house of a later date than the Dolphin. There were no lights in any of the windows and Jon had to knock twice before they heard bolts being drawn, and then the door was opened about six inches on a chain.

"Please go away and do not disturb me," came the quavering voice of Mrs. Flowerdew. "I never buy anything at the door and I am not expecting visitors."

Penny gripped Jon's arm as a warning not to be exasperated.

"We're not selling anything, Mrs. Flowerdew," she said cheerfully. "We're your neighbours from next door - Penelope and Jonathan Warrender - and we've come to say 'Hello' because we shan't be in the hotel tonight when you come to have dinner with my aunt. Would you rather we came to see you in the morning?"

"Oh dear, dear. Penelope and Jonathan to be sure. Thank you so much for calling but I wasn't expecting visitors. I'm going to a dinner party tonight you see... Such a change for me but so very, very kind of my dear neighbour."

"I've a message for you from my mother," Jon said firmly. "Please let us in."

Still twittering like a startled, fussy bird, Mrs. Flowerdew undid the chain and opened the door.

"Delighted to see you both, my dears. You must forgive the confusion in this house but I do find it most difficult to concentrate... Mrs. Warrender has been so kind... so kind now that my dear husband has gone away..."

Penny was suddenly scared. In the dim light of the stone-flagged hall Mrs. Flowerdew, with her fingers twisting nervously together and her grey hair wild about her face, was a pathetic, frightened figure. Usually so confident and impetuous, Penny found herself without words as tears filled her eyes. Then Jon took charge.

"My mother said you would like to see us so please let us talk to you. Of course you find it difficult to concentrate, so does everybody here on Rye Fawkes Day and we want to thank you very much for going into the Dolphin tonight to keep my mother company."

"Yes, and thank you for having our friends here over Christmas," Penny took up quickly. "That's absolutely marvellous especially as there are twins and a Scottie dog. We're all going to help but it's wonderful of you to make it possible."

Almost before she realized what was happening, Mrs. Flowerdew found herself leading them down the gloomy hall and into the big kitchen. The table was laid at one end and there was evidence that Mrs. Flowerdew had been lunching off a boiled egg. A worn easy chair was drawn up to a coal fire smouldering pessimistically in an old-fashioned grate.

"You must excuse the muddle, my dears----" but Penny interrupted her.

"Please, please Mrs. Flowerdew, don't keep on apologizing. We understand and we'll come in tomorrow when we've got more time and you can show us the bedrooms and we'll make some plans together for Christmas. And I'm sure Mrs. Warrender could help you to find somebody to do the cleaning and if not I'll come and do what I can. I'm learning Domestic Science and it will be a favour if you'll let me practise on you. Jon will help too. He doesn't know it yet but he will. I'm to call for you at six o'clock this evening to take you in next door and you will be ready then, won't you?"

She stared at them without speaking. Her lips were trembling and they knew that she was fighting for control. Then she straightened her bowed shoulders.

"Yes, Penelope. I will be ready and I thank you both for calling. My husband does not - did not - go out very much but you are all being kind. And we must get this house ready for our young guests. I shall do that. As the days pass I shall find the time to do more. I am quite strong. Quite strong... Later on, not today, I will show you the rooms but some of them now cannot be opened. I am forbidden to open them. I would like to show you my husband's wonderful library just along the passage but that door is locked. It must be kept locked he says... Very well, my dear. At six o'clock. I shall have ironed my dress by then and as I have much to do..."

When they found themselves in the street again Jon said, "I see what Mother means. Mrs. Flowerdew's very odd and extremely pathetic. And the place is mucky, Penny. It's neglected and did you notice that big door on the left of the hall? That must be the old boy's study. She tried the handle as we passed just to see if it was locked. She must know that she locked it herself."

"Of course she's peculiar and shouldn't be living there alone. I hope I haven't let you in for something, Jon, but I'm sorry for her. I hope the upstairs rooms are cleaner and properly furnished or it won't be much of a Christmas for the Mortons... But apart from her being eccentric, did you sense that she's sort of *haunted* by something? It's as if she had a secret she doesn't dare to share with anybody. I don't think it's just that she misses her husband although the way she talks about him scares me stiff."

"Don't worry too much about her now, Penny. I know what you mean and we'll talk to Mother about her. I expect we can do something to help, but it's a gloomy old place and would have to be turned inside out before it was of any real use to the Dolphin... Let's prowl round a bit and then go and see your other peculiar friend, Mr. Royal. I like our town today. Funny we've never seen it like this before."

Penny clung happily to his arm. The pavements were crowded with people shopping and sightseers from the villages. Small boys in hideous masks were already throwing squibs. The lights in the shops blazed, there was a traffic jam in Cinque Ports Street, and the cafes were packed and the car parks full.

They bought a souvenir programme and studied the route of the procession and then went down by the ancient Landgate on to the flat green Salts - so called because centuries ago these fields were artificially banked to hold in the sea water which evaporated to produce salt. Here, between the river and the town, was built the biggest bonfire either of them had ever seen.

"And there's the boat, Jon. That old hulk at the bottom of the fire. Of course they have to burn it there because it's too big to be hoisted up. What a fire that's going to be... I'll always love Rye, Jon. Not just because it's old but because things like this make us remember that Ryers have been doing it for hundreds and hundreds of years right here where we're standing... No! That's stupid because the sea came up to the walls and where we're standing now would have been covered by the waves once."

Jon nodded. "I know, and I want to find out more about this boat-burning. I'm sure it was going on long before poor old Guy Fawkes. Let's ask Mr. Royal."

There were no customers in the shop; the bookseller saw them through the window of his little office and came forward to welcome them. He had only seen Jon once before but remembered him.

"So glad to see you both. Really tonight is going to be quite an experience. I am always most moved and excited by the practice and perpetuation of old customs and, as you know, this is my first experience of Rye Fawkes."

Several people have advised me to close the shop early and put up the shutters. It all sounds most dramatic, but I suppose it's possible for Rye's visitors to be a trifle exuberant tonight."

Jon did not care very much for Mr. Royal but because Penny liked him he decided to be as agreeable as possible. Royal then asked them to join him in a cup of tea, and as he had a kettle boiling in the little cubby hole at the side of his office, Penny agreed.

"Now Penelope," he said as he flicked biscuit crumbs off his desk. "I wish to consult you about the Book Cellar tonight. I'm told that the bonfire will have burned out by about ten o'clock and I should like to open then just in case any of your young friends would like to come in. I shall be about and if there is any rowdyism we shall close *instantly*. Do you agree and will you help me? And can we, do you think, persuade Jonathan to join us? No doubt you have told him of our efforts to instruct and amuse?"

"I didn't put it quite like that, Mr. Royal, but I have told him about the Cellar and you will come and help tonight, won't you, Jon?"

"I don't think I shall be in the mood for much culture, Mr. Royal, but I'll be there. I've never seen the Cellar. May I go down now?"

Royal unlocked a door and led them down a narrow, stone staircase into a vaulted cellar. He had certainly made it look attractive with a few shaded lights and a candle stuck in a bottle on each of the tables. The small coffee bar with a hot-plate was in an alcove and a record player with a rack of discs above it was behind the door. Penny showed Jon the entrance for the use of customers which was reached from another flight of steps in the alley at the side of the shop.

Royal was certainly enthusiastic about his project and, as Penny had already remarked in her letter, he did not patronize them. Jon asked him about the burning of the boat custom and he became most animated.

"Nothing to do with poor Guy Fawkes, Jonathan. I'm sure of that. Nobody in Rye would have cared about the Gunpowder Plot and at that time the sea was right up to the walls. Either of you ever read Frazer's *Golden Bough*?

I'm not surprised, but if you're interested in magic and old customs you should have a shot at it one day. Anyway, Frazer tells us that way, way back when our distant ancestors were fire-worshippers it was customary to celebrate such rites three times a year - Spring, Midsummer and the beginning of November. So there you are. We're all going pagan tonight and worshipping fire! That's part of it, but Ryers have never really forgotten the sufferings of their 14th century ancestors when the hated French marauders burned and pillaged our town. I like to think that in a return raid they captured a French boat and brought it back here in triumph. No doubt they had no mercy on the crew, but perhaps they hauled that boat ashore down there on the Strand where we still build boats. Then they probably pulled it in triumph through the streets before burning it in some prominent place like the Gun Garden as a warning to all raiders... No wonder everybody in Rye will be watching the procession or the fire tonight, but if you'll both come here at ten and tell any of your young friends, I'll be grateful."

"Sausages! Bangers!" Penny said suddenly. "Why don't we have a 'sausage sizzle' down here? I can do them in a frying pan on the hot plate and it would make a change. It says in the programme that they sell bloaters down on the Salts but why shouldn't the Book Cellar start a new custom?... Of course I know they'll smell a bit but we can keep this door open. May we do bangers, Mr. Royal?... Good. I'm so glad you like them. *Please, dear Jonathan*, run and buy some of the little ones before the shops close."

Jon did not run but obediently set about his errand, and while he was away Mr. Royal talked to Penny about Mrs. Flowerdew. He asked her whether she had known Dr. Flowerdew and was particularly keen to know whether she had ever been in the house.

Penny did not like this conversation. She knew that Royal had been worrying the old lady but was too polite to say so. She was shrewd enough to realize that Royal had a business interest in old books, but she also remembered that the widow had behaved as if she had a secret.

He sensed her embarrassment and said quickly and convincingly, "Forgive me, Penelope. I'm not wishing to pry into Mrs. Flowerdew's affairs. I know that your aunt has befriended her, and there was an occasion, before the doctor died, when I was able to help her a little. I have been told - indeed

the lady herself told me - that he had a large and valuable library. I wonder if that is so? Have you seen it?"

"No, Mr. Royal. I have been in the house but never seen the library. Mrs. Flowerdew doesn't like people to see some of the rooms her husband used and is still very unhappy and upset. Perhaps one day she will be glad of your help, but *please* don't worry her... Good, here's Jon. What a wonderful shopper you've been - pounds and pounds of bangers."

Mr. Royal reimbursed Jon, thanked them both and went out into Landgate Street with them to say good-bye.

"Rum chap," Jon said as they walked back to the Dolphin. "Knows his stuff about Rye. Only hope the two of us don't have to eat all those bangers."

But Penny said nothing about Mr. Royal's curiosity about Mrs. Flowerdew.

The famous torchlight procession started from Ferry Road at seven p.m. and the programme stated that a warning maroon went off ten minutes earlier. Naturally enough Jon and Penny wanted to go there as soon as they had escorted Mrs. Flowerdew into the Dolphin. No sooner had Jon knocked on her door than it opened to disclose the old lady in her party clothes. She must have been waiting on the mat and since their visit of a few hours ago she seemed to have recovered some dignity. True, her coat was old and not nearly as long as her mauve dress which reached almost to her ankles. She was also wearing gloves and a silk scarf over her hair. She stood clutching her handbag. The hall light was too dim for Penny to confirm a suspicion that her face was thickly powdered, but it was obvious that she had taken great pains to pay her hostess a compliment.

"How nice you look, Mrs. Flowerdew," Penny smiled. "You almost make me wish we were coming to the party too. It's a clear night and you'll be able to see the procession pass in the street below and look down on the crowds. I suppose you've seen it lots of times."

"Only once, my dear, and many years ago. My dear husband thought it an interesting custom worth a little study. I remember the bands. I liked the bands. I wonder if they still have them? I've always enjoyed that sort of

music. Shall we go now? I am quite ready because I did not want to keep you waiting... Forgive me one moment but I must check that the study is locked."

They watched her test the handle of the big oak door after which she rummaged in her bag to check that she had the key. Next, she produced another key and locked the front door from the outside and then took Jon's arm and walked about twenty paces to the hotel where Penny took over and escorted her upstairs to Mrs. Warrender's rooms.

Then the young people forgot all about her as they were caught up in the atmosphere and gaiety of Rye Fawkes. They ran together down Trader's Passage and pushed through the crowds making their way to the assembly point down by the railway. The shops were closed but the lights were blazing. Strange figures in fancy dress who were going to take part in the Parade elbowed their way good-humouredly through the crowds. A farm tractor pulling a trailer on which stood a large white plaster horse caused temporary chaos.

"That's for Lady Godiva!" somebody shouted. "Don't keep the poor girl waiting, matey. She'll get cold!"

There were Red Indians too, braves with feathered headdresses and faces thick with war paint. These, Jon declared, were the "Bonfire Boys" who walked with the procession collecting money for charities from the bystanders.

Then Penny changed her mind.

"Do you mind, Jon, if we go up to the High Street? I'd rather see the procession go by in proper order than get squashed down here and see it in bits. Let's go up on Hilder's Cliff so that we can watch them light the bonfire later."

Jon did not mind where they went. He was beginning to realize how much he had missed her. Penny was never slow to show how much she was enjoying herself, never too shy to show her affection, and she was showing both tonight. Soon, as they stood crushed together on the crowded

pavement above the Landgate, they heard the seven o'clock maroon announce that Rye's great, traditional Torchlight Procession was on its way. Then they heard the bands - three of them - and above the rooftops of Cinque Ports Street they saw the reflection of the flickering torches. The crowds swayed with excitement. Children were lifted on to shoulders and a small boy pushed in front of them and blew a toy trumpet.

Jon put his arm round Penny as the first torches turned under the old Strand Gate which still guarded the way into Rye from the north. The Red Indians pranced ahead shaking their collecting boxes while the more enterprising raised buckets and enamel chamber pots on poles to the viewers in upstairs windows. Then the first Military Band, led by a proud Drum-Major wheeled under the ancient gateway and was followed by the always popular "Kent Majorettes" with their own Drum-Majorette. These pretty girls in their smart uniforms earned a tremendous cheer. Behind them the Rye Sea Cadets and then the various tableaux each mounted on a lorry or trailer. All were greeted with applause, and added wolf whistles as Lady Godiva clad in gauze bowed graciously from her white horse. Another band, more tableaux, including an Aladdin's Cave, Arabian Nights, Don't Drink and Drive, and then the third band followed by the "Bloater Boat", another Rye tradition, and finally a replica of the Burning Boat itself. And on each side of the procession the torchbearers carried their flaming tribute to the past.

At eight o'clock the crowds began to desert the streets and surged down to the Salts as the first of the fireworks went up and three-quarters of an hour later came the great event of the night - the Chaining of Rye Fawkes. Now the three bands were massed and played as one. Most of those who were already in fancy dress were given a torch to escort Rye Fawkes as he was carried in triumph in his special chair by Rye's firemen.

Jon and Penny, now down on the Salts by the Bloater Boat from which hot bloaters were being sold, saw him arrive high on the shoulders of his bearers. Nobody seemed to know who he was. "Probably a television personality," Jon said. "But who cares? From here he looks more like an undertaker in his black topper. Watch him, Penny. Can't you see? I'd lift you up if you didn't weigh half a ton... They've let him down now. There's a sort

of cave at the bottom of the fire. He's got a lighted torch and he's shoving it in----"

She was standing on tiptoe in front of him as he put his hands on her waist and suddenly lifted her off the ground for a few seconds. A great cheer went up as the tiny flame inside the bonfire spread to the brushwood round the base. Rye Fawkes was back in his chair again and as his bearers then carried him out into the shadows, Penny slipped to the ground and held Jon's hands against her.

As the flames roared and crackled and sent a shower of sparks dancing across the river, a gang of boys threw lighted crackers into the crowds. Girls screamed excitedly as part of the structure of the great fire collapsed and then a cheer went up as the boat began to burn fiercely. A great plume of flame-tinted smoke billowed up and blew across the rooftops. The frightening tang of burning timber mingled with the smell of cooking bloaters and above the murmur of the crowd came the crackle of burning wood and the roar of the consuming flames.

By ten o'clock it had nearly burned itself out. Only a great glowing mass of embers was fanned suddenly into flame as the wind came fresh from the sea. The boat was a glowing skeleton as the crowds melted away.

"I'm afraid of fire," Penny whispered. "But it's beautiful and it makes things clean before it destroys them. Do you know what I mean? Of course you do, Jon. You always do... We must go and do the sausages now."

Mr. Royal was already in the Cellar and seemed rather hot and bothered when they asked him whether he'd enjoyed himself and what he thought of it.

"Very interesting. Bonfire of course is nothing more than pagan fire-worship. I'm glad to see you both but I wonder now whether we should have opened the Cellar. You'd better look after these sausages, Penelope, and perhaps you should light the candles, Jonathan. I'm going upstairs now but you can call me if you want me."

Jon thought this was a bit cool but almost before he could comment the first customers arrived - two Red Indians accompanied by two pretty Kent Majorettes. In ten minutes the Cellar was full and thick with the smell of coffee and cooking sausages and so noisy that it was impossible to hear the record player. Then Henry, with two girls and a serious-looking young man arrived. The former was in great form and went behind the coffee bar and kissed Penny to the delight of all the customers. When he had a chance to make himself heard he told Jon that the four of them had arrived before the Cellar was open.

"Just as well we did, I suppose. We found the steps although the light wasn't on, I thought I saw someone at the bottom fiddling about with the door and switched on my torch. It was one of those Red Indians wearing a mask. Don't know what he was up to but he just pushed past us and ran off,"

"So what?" Jon shouted above the din, "The place is full of Indians. He may be in here now,"

Then a girl standing by the bar screamed, "Telephone!" and Penny ran to answer it as Jon shouted for silence.

Penny, wondering why Royal had not answered it upstairs, put one hand over her left ear as she lifted the receiver to the other. In the sudden hush demanded by Jon she heard her aunt's voice.

"Hello! Is that Rye Royal? I must speak to Jonathan Warrender please. It's very urgent... Oh, it's you Penny darling... Listen, I want you both to come back to the Dolphin at once. I've just taken Mrs. Flowerdew home, but while she was in the Dolphin somebody has broken into her house through the kitchen window."

4. Enter Lone Piners

Just before five o'clock on a frosty December evening, Jonathan Warrender drove his mother's car into the station yard at Rye.

"Not signalled so it's sure to be late," he smiled at Penny sitting beside him. "Shall we stay here in the warm or pace the platform?"

"Pace, please It's a nice evening and I have an affection for this station. You've probably forgotten the times we've met each other here, and although I loathe stations when I have to say Good-bye, I love those which mean coming home and meeting people I'm fond of."

"I get the point," Jon smiled as he leaned across her to open the door. "I do remember meeting you here on various occasions. Excited about Christmas?"

"Yes I am," she admitted as they strolled on to the platform after greeting the old porter they had known for years. "I'm sentimental about Christmas. I like snow and holly and mistletoe and parcels and church bells and Christmas cribs. I like the lot and this one is going to be special for me - and for us... What do you think Peter will be like, Jon? It's a long time since we've seen her. I'm glad she could come. Fun for us as we can show her round because she's never been here before. What do you think she'll *look* like, Jon? She's cut off her plaits, and because I think she's the most lovely girl I've ever seen I shall probably be madly jealous of her."

Jon took her arm.

"You're right, Penny. Peter is as nice as she looks and so, oddly enough, are you... I've just heard the bell in the signal-box. There goes the green and now old Jim up there will open the level crossing... Where shall we wait? You down this end and me at the other?"

"No. Don't leave me. It's ridiculous but I feel shy or something. I hope this holiday is going to be a success."

Before he could answer, the two-coach diesel rumbled over the crossing and snorted to a halt. Down went a window a few yards from where they were waiting and there were the twins. Penny only had time to realize that they were still absurdly alike when Jon ran forward. Dickie was first out, dragging two suitcases behind him.

"Hello, Jon," he panted. "Those two in there treat us like slaves. If they'd had their way Mary and I would have had to carry these cases on our heads from home all the way to Charing Cross. They're insufferable. Don't *shove*, Mary... Thank you very much, Jon. Your assistance is deeply appreciated. And your courtesy."

This was a new approach and Jon tried not to show his surprise as Dickie shook hands with him. Mary, with Macbeth the Scottie in her arms, then descended with dignity, smiled a greeting to Jon and ran over to Penny.

"Lovely to be here, Penny. Thank you for asking us and you're looking absolutely gorgeous. Say a Christmas greeting to darling Mackie, please. Like us, he's worn out with travelling."

Penny hugged Mary and then stooped obediently to pat Macbeth who, delighted with his release, was getting entangled in his tartan lead. Then she had a quick look at the twins and realized that they were growing up. Although they were so much alike and both wore navy-blue anoraks and fawn trousers, Dickie looked very much the tough schoolboy beside his sister.

David was on the platform now with more luggage and laughing over his shoulder at Peter who was clasping two big parcels. Then she saw Penny and flashed her a smile as she jumped to the platform.

The train chugged out on its way across the Marsh to Appledore and Ashford, and the friends took stock of each other. David did not change, Penny decided. Nice-looking in a plain sort of way; sturdy and tough and his eyes were kind as always as he smiled at her before turning to Peter.

"We've got her here at last, Penny, and she's come willingly. Only the Warrenders could have got her away from Witchend. What are we going to

do with all this gear? Hire a bus? Looks as if we've come for a month!"

"I have an automobile awaiting your pleasure," Jon said gravely. "It is an old motor but what won't go in the boot can go inside and the twins on the roof rack .. o Welcome to Rye, Peter. Grand to have you here."

Peter, Penny noticed, was almost as tall as Jon. She was wearing a sheepskin jacket and her golden hair, gleaming in the dim light of the platform lamps, fell to her shoulders. She had always been slim and mini-skirts suited her. As she smiled almost shyly at them both Penny realized that she was really beautiful. Serenely so, and nobody would guess that she was a country girl who could ride and swim better than anybody they had ever met. She looked calm and very happy as she came over and said, "I've been looking forward to this ever since you asked me. I can hardly believe I'm here and I've got so much to tell you, Penny. Isn't everything wonderful? Is the Dolphin far away? Could just the two of us walk up together and let the others go in the automobile with the luggage and my parcels?"

"I was going to ask you that very thing. Let me show you Rye, Peter. Shan't be long, Jon. Your mother will understand, so let's have a picnic tea up in our room before we take them to next door."

Peter entrusted her parcels to David and the two girls watched Jon drive away with the twins waving from the window.

"Now show me, Penny. David has told me a lot about Rye, and if Mrs. Warrender really won't mind p'raps we needn't hurry."

"She always understands. She's marvellous... We've always wanted you to come here, Peter, and now I can hardly believe it's happened and we've got a whole week before Christmas Day. Is David's mother better and what about Mr. Sterling? I know you were anxious about leaving him."

Peter explained that her father had closed up Witchend and gone to stay with his brother at Hereford, and that Mr. and Mrs. Morton, with whom she had stayed in London the previous night, were now on their way to

Torquay. They sent their love. Having got the adults settled, Penny enthusiastically took her friend for a tour of Rye.

First she showed her part of the old wall of the town in Cinque Ports Street and then led her under the Landgate and looked down on the Salts from Hilder's Cliff. It was a clear, frosty night and miles away across the flat Marsh they could see the flashing light of the new lighthouse at Dungeness. From the High Street, in which the busy shops were now closing, they strolled up Lion Street to the church and waited for the quarter boys to strike. Next Penny led her across the cobbles to the bastion of the Ypres Tower, now a museum, which was built about 1250 to protect the town from French invaders. Then she took her into the Gun Garden next to the old fortress, where the waves of the English Channel had once broken against the base of the cliff.

"It's the sea being so near that makes it all so thrilling," Peter said. "We've got our old castles, like Ludlow and Clun, but I'm not used to living, or even having holidays, at the sea. I've hardly ever been out of Shropshire, Penny. I'm an old stick-in-the-mud. We haven't got a car and anyway, I like horses better. I'm sure I'm going to love your Rye and I can understand why you do. It's not just that it's old, is it? So much of England is old without being old-fashioned, but there can't be many little towns like this one because it's busy and up-to-date and yet here we are standing in the very place where they used to fight off an enemy... And all this flat, grassy land which the sea once covered is exciting. I like the smell of it too... Is the Dolphin far? I'm getting hungry."

So Penny took her back to Trader's Street and brought her home. Fred Vasson, the porter, was in the hall of the hotel and told them that the others were waiting for them upstairs and that their luggage was already next door.

Mrs. Warrender's private sitting-room seemed very full when Penny opened the door. Jon and David were by the window, talking amiably. Mary was on the hearthrug before a log fire, tickling Macbeth who lay ecstatically on his back. Dickie was walking up and down in front of his hostess, recalling with dramatic gestures one of their previous adventures in Rye.

Peter, looking over Penny's shoulder into the lovely room, noticed David's face light up when he saw her. He hurried over and stood beside her.

Mrs. Warrender came forward to greet her. "I'm glad you walked up," she smiled. "The best way to be introduced to a town like Rye is to arrive in the dusk or the dark and catch something of its old magic and explore it in detail in daylight. We are happy to welcome you, Petronella. I've heard so much about you and your kindness to Penny and Jon when they visit Shropshire that I've been looking forward to having you here. Penny will have told you that you are sleeping at the old house next door and you will have some of your meals there. I'm sure you've heard about the Dolphin's secret room which now belongs to Jon and Penny so I've arranged for you to have tea up there now. I'm not going to interfere with any of you except to remind you all - including twins and dog - that I want you to be helpful and gentle to Mrs. Flowerdew in whose house you will be sleeping. Penny knows what I mean... Now I'm going downstairs to see what's happening in the hotel and you can go up and make some plans... Be happy with us, dear," and she kissed her lightly before Peter could find words to thank her.

Then, as the door closed behind her aunt, Penny said quickly, "Of course. Our room. Let Peter unlock it just as I did the first time Jon and I came to the Dolphin."

Jon passed over a heavy iron key.

"But I'd forgotten," Peter said. "Of course you've all told me about the smugglers' room and the secret passage. Show me, please."

Penny led the way to a small landing with a narrow staircase leading up on each side of it. She turned left, with Peter on her heels, and the twins, grumbling about delay and starvation, behind her. The staircase, which was only wide enough for one, soon turned sharply on to another small landing.

Here Penny switched on a light.

"The door on the right is my bedroom. I'll show you presently, although we're sharing a room next door while you're here. What can you see in front of you?"

There was not anything except the oak panelling of the walls and Peter, feeling rather foolish, said so.

"Buck up and show her the hole of the secret door," Mary implored from the foot of the stairs. "Our stomachs are rumbling with hunger."

Penny took Peter's hand and guided it to a small hole in the panelling which was hidden when the door of her room was open.

"Put your finger in the hole and push up the wooden latch. Good. Now shove the panel away from you and go ahead up the stairs. There's a light switch in the wall on your right. Lucky for us that electricity was brought up here a year or two ago. Here's the key. Open the door at the top of the stairs and mind your head."

So Peter led the way. The staircase continued, turned again on to another landing on which was a small arched door with iron hinges and a massive iron lock. Penny was close behind her as she fitted in the key and, using both hands, turned it until the lock shot back.

"Pull the handle towards you and mind my feet," Penny warned as the door swung open across the landing. "You first, Peter... This secret has always been yours too because you're really the first Lone Piner, but it's taken you a long time to get here. Close the door behind you, David."

The others crowded in behind Peter and somebody trod on Mackie who had only just been put down by his exhausted mistress and who yelped in protest. When order had been partially restored, Peter saw that the room was narrow with a sharply-sloping, beamed ceiling and the walls, like those of the stairs, were panelled in oak. On the right, where the ceiling was lowest, were three narrow windows, and opposite the door was a fine brick fireplace in which logs were smouldering in an iron basket. The floor was uneven and only partially covered with matting and there were four odd chairs and two camp stools. Against one of the walls was a bookcase packed with books and paperbacks and on the floor was a portable record player and some discs in a rack. The finest piece of furniture, however, was a heavy table in the middle of the room which was now piled with sandwiches and cakes.

"My mother furnished this for us a year ago," Jon explained to Peter. "She gave us the room when we first came and met David and the twins. She had this safely wired for electricity and we've got a plug for a kettle and a little griller thing over in the corner. None of the staff is allowed in here and we have to keep it clean. We're sure the room was used by smugglers because there's a secret stair and passage behind the panelling by the fireplace that leads right down to the foot of the hill by the road. It's closed up now but the twins will show you the secret door and the message scratched with a diamond on one of the windows over there. Penny found it the first time we were in the room. Show Peter now, Richard."

The twins led her over to the windows where they had to kneel on the floor. Dickie breathed heavily on the glass of the middle window almost at floor level and then rubbed the dust from the pane.

"Lie down and look carefully," Mary advised. "The letters are very scratchy and difficult to read but we think they were done by a prisoner languishing here in captivity - although we don't know how he happened to have a diamond with him," she added honestly.

In considerable discomfort Peter managed to see a few scratches.

"O.K. then. I give up. Tell me what it says, Mary. I bet you couldn't read it first time."

"She's never read it," Penny said. "I told her. It says '*God Save England and ye Towne of Rye.*' Our only idea is that it might have been a password. I should get up before you muck up your stockings. As you're the chief guest today you can sit in the only comfortable chair, otherwise we take it in turns. Kettle's on and while we eat Jon and I have got plenty to tell you."

Peter got up and rubbed her knees.

"I've got one question to ask and then I'll listen. How did that table get here? It couldn't have been brought up those stairs or through the windows."

"Clever girl," Jon smiled. "Have a sandwich. I made them and they're stuffed with sardine. I asked that intelligent question too and experts say

that it must have been made up here."

"We reckon this room may have belonged to a sort of King Smuggler," Dickie said. "If we tore up the floor maybe we'd find his skeleton. Do you want to see the entrance to the secret passage because that's the last of the exhibits. You do? Show her, Mary, and then we can really settle down to eat. I can see some sausage rolls with the sausage sticking out each end and that's the sort I like!"

Mary led Peter over to the big fireplace and knelt on the floor again. The others - even Dickie - crowded round as they remembered the night on which they had discovered the stairs and passage used by the old-time smugglers.

"Now, Peter," Mary said, still holding the older girl's hand. "See that mouse hole in the panel right down on the floor? Put your finger in and don't worry because there aren't any mice... Can you feel a sort of wooden latch? Press it up and there you are. It's like the one outside Penny's room."

There came a muffled click and slowly, very slowly, the panel next to the fireplace swung outwards into the room. It swung hesitantly with an eerie creaking, disclosing a dark cavity from which there came into their warm room a horrid breath of dank, cold air and a smell of fungus and decay.

Peter shivered and sat back on her heels.

"Thanks very much, Mary, but you can close it now. I don't care for it and I don't want to go down. Do you mean to say you all went down there on that night of your first adventure, when you found the Dolphins' treasure, David?"

"Yes, we did. I remember how Mary's teeth were chattering. Jon says they've closed it up at the bottom but it goes down to the level of the cellars and then steeply downhill under the garden. There was a hidden entrance on a patch of waste ground behind some fisherman's huts above the main road. That's closed now."

"I found the diamonds," Penny said quietly. "Jon saw them first but he let me find them. They were in a pile of earth and rubbish in the passage. They'd been hidden in the roots of an old tree which was growing through the wall and which had blown down in a gale. The passage wasn't safe so we've blocked it up. I never went down again but an underground passage leading to the Dolphin was fine for smugglers. There are doors in the panelling of the two rooms below this one but nobody knows about them except Mrs. Warrender and us... Now let's have our picnic before we go next door. I must tell you about Mrs. Flowerdew else all of you may be surprised. Sometimes she's rather off-putting."

So Mary closed the secret door and Jon threw more logs on the fire as they crowded round the table. Dickie, after dealing with several of the super sausage rolls, broke a long silence.

"That was a very good adventure in the secret passage and finding those diamonds for Mrs. Warrender and being imprisoned in that bungalow when the sea came in. What have you got for us this time, Jon and Penny? What's this mystery about the old lady next door? Is she a villain?"

Penny told them what had happened since Dr. Flowerdew had died and how difficult and eccentric his widow had been. She told them also about the night of the Rye Fawkes celebrations and about Rye Royal which they were going to show them tomorrow.

"Dickie will be interested to know that we were having a sausage sizzle down in the Book Cellar under Mr. Royal's shop. The place was full when I had to answer the telephone. It was Mrs. Warrender asking us to come home because while Mrs. Flowerdew had been spending the evening with her here, somebody tried to burgle her house. We had to rush off after telling Mr. Royal and I think he closed the Cellar after we'd gone."

"You say 'tried to burgle the house'." David said. "Do you mean the chap didn't get in?"

"No. He got in, and presumably got out, through the kitchen window and the old lady swears he didn't take anything. It seems he was only interested in her husband's library which she always keeps locked. It's a very thick

door as you will see presently, and don't, please, ask her to show you that room because she gets upset. She's peculiar about it. When we were talking about our big treasure just now, I was thinking that there may be something else rather valuable in that library."

"Won't she say?"

"No, David, she won't. Somebody had been trying to force the lock that night. We could see the marks on the wood and iron but the lock held. The police thought it wasn't a real professional burglar. Mrs. Flowerdew didn't want the police called, but my aunt insisted. They seemed rather browned off because they're always busy on Rye Fawkes."

"No clues?" David asked.

"Yes. One black and white feather from a Red Indian's head-dress on the kitchen floor." Jon grinned. "Not surprising really as lots of the Bonfire Boys were dressed as Indians with painted faces. Rye was full of them that night and I wouldn't have recognized you if you'd used such a disguise. A friend of ours saw an Indian messing about round the door of Royal's Book Cellar. Best evening of the year to commit a crime in Rye, David. Everybody is watching the procession or the bonfire and anyway the police never caught anybody. How could they?"

"But is this old dear still worrying about it?" Peter persisted. "You must tell us before we go in there, Penny. Is she still scared and is she still alone in the house? Is she the sort of person who's always afraid of burglars, and if she's so poor why should a burglar want to get in?"

The two Warrenders tried to explain that Mrs. Flowerdew was eccentric at the best of times, but that since Rye Fawkes she had lived in a stage of siege and would only let Mrs. Warrender into the house.

"But she's looking forward to us coming. She really is. She's desperately lonely, and yet she won't sell the house or leave it for a holiday," Penny went on. "We've told you the worst about her but when you know her I'm sure you'll want to help her. But we did explain this in our letters, didn't we?"

You don't really mind, do you? She doesn't even mind Mackie, Mary. I told her he slept on your bed."

"Then I shall love her for ever, Penny. Don't you worry. Dickie and I will cheer her up. What she wants is what our mother calls 'an interest'. We'll give her one. What's the house like inside?"

"We'll go over soon. Some of the rooms are a bit gloomy and there isn't an awful lot of furniture, and only one bathroom with a geyser. Some rooms on the first floor where she sleeps are locked. There's a fine big kitchen where she lives and eats, and the idea is that we help her with the house-keeping and, my aunt says, see that she has enough to eat herself. We thought it would be fun to have our supper every night up here on our own. Whatever we've all been doing during the day we all meet here at six o'clock every evening. O.K.?"

"O.K. and a very nice bit of organization," David said. "Just tell me the worst before we go over there. Have you arranged for me to share my bedroom with my brother? I should have asked this before we accepted your invitation."

Penny actually looked embarrassed.

"It's a nice room, David. Really it is. Two beds a long way apart. Then there's a *tiny* room for Mary and Mackie, and the other old room next door to Mary for Peter and me. It was the only way to arrange it. There isn't even room for Jon who is sleeping over here. His mother likes him handy in the Dolphin when we're busy."

David looked at Dickie who laughed rudely.

"You'll just have to turn your face to the wall, brother, if my work disturbs you. And don't think you're funny by mocking me. I haven't had a chance yet to tell the others about my work."

"Tell us, little man," Jon said. "What is your night work?"

For a moment the boy looked disconcerted and hurt and then, as she had often done before, his twin came to his rescue.

"It isn't funny, Jonathan. Richard is concerned with his career and it's very enterprising and intelligent of him to be concerned, and our father agrees that it is. We do not ask *you* rude, mocking questions about your career, so you leave Dickie alone. David knows about it too."

"No he doesn't," Dickie said quickly. "Up till last Wednesday I was thinking very seriously about being a cricketer for Middlesex. Now it's different and I'm going to be a journalist. I have work to do every night writing up a special diary of events seen and things recorded. That's the way to learn. I may send this diary to Tom and Jenny up in Shropshire and Harriet in London because we don't often see her, and don't forget that she is a member of this Club which is important."

"Sorry, Richard," David apologized. "I didn't mean to mock, but will you try and do your reporting before I come to bed?"

His brother gave him a forgiving grin as Penny jumped up excitedly.

"But that's marvellous, Dickie! I'd forgotten to tell you all but here's a lucky break for the young journalist. You all remember James Wilson of the *Clarion* and that lovely girl of his called Judith? Of course you do. Well, they're married now and coming to the Dolphin for Christmas. They booked last week. I'm not sure which day they arrive but James will be very proud of *you*, Dickie, won't he?"

"I hope I may be worthy, Penelope. That is very good news. Mary and I both like James and Judith. Thank you for the information... And there is just one small point. In the company of adults I shall be glad if you will address me as Richard."

Peter and Penny looked at him in amazement. It was not so long ago that the twins spoke to each other and their friends - and even chance acquaintances - in a special childish language of their own. It was remarkably effective with adults and often reduced them to fury. They went to separate schools and so they had only been able to use their own

language when they were together - and they hated being parted - in the holidays.

"We shall do our best to remember, Richard," Peter said gravely. "Let's go and see Mrs. Flowerdew. I hope she likes us and we don't let you down, Penny."

"Up the Lone Piners!" Mary said as she picked up Macbeth. "This doesn't sound like another adventure for us - more like an errand of mercy. We must ask clever Jonathan to invent a new way of getting my darling up and down these stairs. They're too steep for him and nobody except me cares. I don't think he's really going to have a happy Christmas."

There was no bell to ring at thirty-nine and as expected the door was locked when Jon tried the handle. Penny knocked firmly while David removed Dickie from the letter-box through which he was trying to get a preview.

Then the door opened suddenly and the visitors saw Mrs. Flowerdew for the first time. As she lifted her hand to her greying hair, Peter realized that she was strained and nervous and did not really know how to deal with the situation. So she stepped over the threshold and held out her hand.

"This is like an invasion, Mrs. Flowerdew, but before you even try to get used to us we want to say how grateful we are to you for making it possible for us to come to Rye. I'm Petronella Sterling and I'm a new girl here and I'm going to be the first to say thank you."

The old lady smiled tremulously, and before Penny could introduce David and the twins the latter took control. On such occasions Mary was invariably the first to speak and sometimes "put on an act". She did not attempt the latter tonight and Richard backed her.

"My twin and I can't help looking alike," she smiled as she shook hands, "but we want to say a special thank you because Penny told us that you don't mind little dogs like Macbeth. He's very brave and if you get to love him he will guard you like anything. He's faithful and true and I won't let him be a bother to you and we'll arrange about his food... Are you going to like him? Look, he's wagging his tail at you."

Mrs. Flowerdew stooped to pat the little dog and the ice was broken.

"Of course I like him, my dear, and I'm glad to see you all. I've been very lonely and you will be good for me. Penelope has told me about you and now I must shake hands with David and show you your rooms. I do so hope you will be happy and comfortable. It's an old house, like me, and it must get used to having young people in it... The nice Mr. Vasson from the Dolphin carried up your luggage, so come along and see your rooms and then come down to the kitchen and I'll have cocoa ready for you and we'll get to know each other better."

The house was much bigger than it appeared to be from the street and the rooms which they were to use were all on the second floor. The big one which Penny and Peter were sharing was in the front, overlooking the street, and next to that was Mary's single room. Down the corridor, with a window overlooking the rooftops, was the room for David and Richard in which the latter was delighted to see a table at which he could work. All the furniture was heavy and old-fashioned and smelled of polish but the rooms were clean and, without central heating, rather cold.

Before Mrs. Flowerdew left them to unpack she gave them a little lecture.

"You will all realize that I am not used to letting rooms and you must ask me if there is anything you want. Mrs. Warrender has been most kind and I am glad to have you all here. Come down when you are ready. Penelope will show you the way."

"Well, well," Dickie said when she had gone downstairs. "It's a bit like the frozen north, but we shall cope. We'll get on with her O.K. and it's a long time since we did a bit of comforting. If I were you, Mary, I'd look inside your wardrobe before you stow your gear away. Or put Mackie in first to scare the ghosts. I don't care for empty wardrobes. I always open the door and shout just to make sure there's nobody inside... Come on, brother. You can open ours."

Half an hour later Penny led them down two flights of dimly-lit stairs into a dimly-lit hall, past the door of the old man's library and into the living-room at the back of the house. Penny knew that her aunt had helped Mrs.

Flowerdew to make it more comfortable and even made her accept two old easy chairs from the hotel.

There were sandwiches on the table and two big jugs of steaming cocoa and the old lady made them sit down and served them herself. Jon and Penny knew from experience that it was difficult to maintain a conversation with her and David, sitting next to Peter was in one of his silent moods. So the twins, until they both began to yawn, chattered away telling Mrs. Flowerdew about some of their previous adventures, but she seemed to find it difficult to respond.

Penny broke up the party by reminding Jon that he ought to go back to the Dolphin. "I'll come with you and say good night to your mother, but I won't be long, Peter. Don't turn the light out... And don't worry about us in the morning, Mrs. Flowerdew. We'll get our own breakfast and I'll bring yours up to you, and it's no use protesting because we're here to help you as well as enjoy ourselves... Leave the front door on the latch, please, and I'll go straight up... Good night, and thank you again for having us. Good night, twins and David. 'Night, Mackie."

As soon as they were outside, Jon led her over to the wall at the end of the street from where they could look across the levels to Rye Harbour. The moon was up and the night was clear and frosty. The sound of voices and laughter came from a pub in the street below but all else was quiet. He put his arm round her shoulders.

"Suppose I shan't see you alone now until after Christmas," he whispered. "Don't worry, Penny. It will work out all right in there. The twins are more sensible than they used to be and Peter's marvellous. You two girls will make it work I know."

"We'll try, Jon, but don't you feel something odd about that house? It's never come to life, has it? I'm worried because the others may be disappointed and want to go back for Christmas."

Jon, used to her quick changes of mood, told her not to be ridiculous and took her indoors to say good night to his mother.

When she got back to thirty-nine the light was still on in the kitchen but she went straight upstairs. The door of Mary's room was ajar and she called "Good night, Penny. Thank you for asking us and we think it's marvellous. Mackie is guarding me and don't you two girls make a row in there."

Peter was sitting in front of the old-fashioned dressing-table brushing her hair. She turned and smiled as Penny closed the door.

"I'm excited, Penny. It's wonderful to be here at last. Mrs. Flowerdew is a funny old thing but we'll make a fuss of her. I know what you feel about this house - I feel it too, but it's just that it hasn't been lived in properly... We've got so much to gossip about, Penny. I want to know all about you and Jon and I can't explain how happy I am."

Penny smiled and for a little while, after they had opened the window and turned out the light, they rekindled their old friendship. Peter told her about her new life in the riding stables and how she still loved living at Witchend with her father. She gave her news of Tom and Jenny and other friends in Shropshire and was still whispering about David when she realized that Penny was asleep.

But Peter could not sleep. The day had been long and exciting and she was not used to the sounds of a small town at night. At home, in the heart of the Shropshire hills, all that she heard through her open window was the cry of the hunting owl and the sigh of the wind, but now she was disturbed by the sound of voices in the street and footsteps on the cobbles. Then, just as she turned over and closed her eyes tightly and tried to concentrate on sleep, she heard the quarter boys strike from the church tower. Next, although there was no traffic in Trader's Street, she was aware of the rattle and roar of motor cycles, presumably racing each other round the town. She turned on her back and put her hands over her ears, wondering how anybody could live peacefully in a town - even a town as exciting as Rye. Then her thoughts turned, as they so often did, to David, because she knew that one day she would live wherever he had to be and be happy to do so, and while she was still contemplating this agreeable prospect she heard the creaking of a floor-board just outside the door. She felt under her pillow for the torch which David had given her and sat up in bed with a thumping heart. Slowly the door opened and Mary whispered, "I can't get to sleep, Penny and Peter."

I hate not going to sleep but I think it's because this place is so quiet after London."

Peter slipped out of her warm bed and put on her dressing-gown.

"Go back to bed, Mary. I'll come and tuck you up. Don't you dare to wake Penny."

Mary, who had always been devoted to Peter, did as she was told, and after embracing Macbeth who was half under her eiderdown, she kept a firm hold on Peter's hand as she snuggled between the sheets again.

"Sorry, Petah - I used to call you Petah when I was young, didn't I? I know I shouldn't have done that but this is a peculiar house and I'm sure I heard someone creeping about downstairs."

"I expect it was Mrs. Flowerdew going to bed. I couldn't sleep either so I'll stay here for five minutes. I'm glad you called me. Silly not to when you're a bit scared."

"Don't tell the others," Mary whispered. "And please keep your bedroom door open just a crack and then I shan't worry... Stay for a little while."

She was asleep in five minutes and Peter tip-toed back to her own bed feeling wider awake than ever. Penny, with her copper-coloured hair all over her pillow and a gentle smile on her lips, slept on peacefully.

Peter tried again and for a few minutes she must have drowsed off until she was awakened by the church clock striking eleven. As the last stroke died away she heard, without any doubt, the sound of a woman crying bitterly somewhere in the house. She remembered that the bedroom door was now ajar. For a moment or two there was silence and then, from somewhere below, the sobbing broke out again and Peter had never heard anyone in such distress. She realized that if Mary heard this she would be very frightened and if the dog was disturbed he would probably bark and wake the boys.

She got out of bed again and woke Penny as gently as she could with a hand over her mouth.

"Wake up, Penny. *Please wake up.* Somebody is crying downstairs. It must be Mrs. Flowerdew and something awful must have happened..."

Penny grunted, pushed her hand away and muttered something which sounded like, "Don't be ridiculous," and then sat up.

"Sorry, Penny," Peter whispered. "Don't wake Mary or Mackie but get up and listen with me at the door. I can hear Mrs. Flowerdew crying."

Penny nodded, got out of bed and fumbled for her dressing-gown. Gently Peter opened their door wider and the two girls stepped barefoot into the passage. For a few moments they could only hear each other's breathing and then the silence was broken by the terrifying sound of a woman's sobs. "Oh!" Penny whispered. "She must be ill. Come quickly, Peter."

"What about David?"

"No. He'll wake Dickie. We must see for ourselves."

A crack of light showed that the library door was ajar and the sobs were coming from inside. Gently they pushed back the door and stood for a horrified moment on the threshold of the forbidden room.

Mrs. Flowerdew was sitting behind her husband's desk with her head resting on her outstretched arms. Between her hands was an old book open at the last page.

5. The Message

When the Lone Piners had gone to bed and the house was quiet again, Mrs. Flowerdew sat for a time by the dying fire in the kitchen. She had slept badly since her husband died, but tonight she was unusually excited.

She stretched her hands to the feeble flames and thought about the youngsters, who only half an hour ago had been sitting round this table, chattering as if they had known her for years. How nice they were and how remarkable that this was the first time she had ever entertained such guests. Not even the young Warrenders who lived next door had even been in this room. And how pretty, in their different ways, were the two older girls, and how kind they had been.

Mrs. Warrender had told her that she must find some other interests and that her husband would have wished her to do so. She had not told her kind friend that it was unlikely that Charles Flowerdew would have wished any such thing. Only she knew how self-centred and secretive he had been. Nobody else - for they had no family and no close relations - knew how completely he had lived in the past. But she had remained devoted to him. At the beginning of his illness he had told her that everything he had, including the house, would be hers when he had gone. Only once after that, on the day before he died, had he mentioned his will again, and even then he had been sharp in his instructions not to be in a hurry to sell the house and not to sell his books. Timidly she had asked him why, and whether he had something else to tell her but he had become angry. She had calmed him down a little but had not dared to question him again. The lawyer, when he had told her that there were no bequests to anyone else, had asked if he had left any other messages and she had said "No".

She was too proud to tell anyone - particularly Mrs. Warrender - that, in spite of her devotion to her husband, he had rarely confided in her. What would he have thought of these young people growing up in an age that he had not even recognized? All his life, and particularly the last few years, he had lived in a past age with his books and his musty old records while she had done what she could to look after him.

And now it was nearly Christmas which had always passed virtually unnoticed in this house. But she had noticed when the church bells had rung out and the carol singers had sung again on the cobbles of Trader's Street. Charles had never cared. He was not against Christmas but it had never meant anything to him.

It was at this moment, when Mrs. Flowerdew remembered the Christmases of her childhood, that she made up her mind that this one, with the young people, was going to be different. And so was she. Mrs. Warrender was right when she told her that she must learn to live again - a new life that only now was beginning.

As she wondered what she could do to strengthen this resolution she remembered that her husband's bedroom next to her own, and in which he had died quite peacefully two months ago, was still locked. None of his things had been moved and she had never found the courage to go back there.

Now, then, was the time. Now, before she went to bed and before this new-found resolve left her to the old despair. Now was the time.

From a drawer in the dresser she took a bunch of keys and went upstairs. On the first landing she stood still and listened, but there was no sound from her visitors on the floor above. She passed her room and quietly unlocked the next door, pushed it back, switched on the light and stepped over the threshold. The room was as it had been left - cold, clean and tidy. She closed the door and stood for a long minute in silence. What was there here to remind her of the one she had cared for with devotion for so long? Not much - only perhaps the books on his bedside table. Rather surprisingly there was a Bible, an old book of the sayings of the Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, and a thick, red volume which she had seen more than once on his desk. It was called *The History and Antiquities of the Ancient Town and Port of Rye* and was written by William Holloway.

As she picked them up she remembered that, in the early days of his illness, Charles had asked her to fetch the History from his library. Even then she had not been surprised that when he was seriously ill he had wanted as his bedside reading one of the few standard books on Rye.

She shivered as she looked round. Deep down, perhaps, she had been wondering whether the room in which he had died would have any sort of message for her. It had not, but perhaps the books would have, so she carried them downstairs after locking the door behind her.

Instead of going into the kitchen she unlocked the library door. The room was cold and smelled musty, so she switched on the electric fire and sat in the old leather chair behind the desk as he had done for a large part of his life. Nothing had changed here. The books still stretched from floor to ceiling. On the floor under the shelves were box files and parcels of old prints. In one corner a steel filing cabinet seemed out of place and a table was piled with old magazines, scholarly reviews, and cuttings from newspapers, many of which were yellow with age. On the desk in front of her were more labelled files containing loose sheets of notes and cuttings, a pile of lined foolscap, a pen tray of pencil stumps, unused stamps and a few ball-point pens.

She had already looked through the drawers with her lawyer and found nothing which could help her or anybody else to know why he did not want the house sold or anyone, at any time, to come into this room. She knew how he hoarded anything to do with Rye and the other Cinque Ports, and his favourite period, which was the 16th century and the reign of the first Queen Elizabeth. No particular instructions had been left with his bank and there was no safe in the house, and yet Mrs. Flowerdew was sure that the lawyer thought he had a secret and wondered why she knew nothing about it.

So, looking small and frail in the big chair, she turned on the reading lamp and examined the books she had brought down from his bedside. She held the Bible by its covers over the desk and shook it to see if anything fell out. Nothing did and there was no indication that he had read it regularly. The front fly-leaf was inscribed with his name in spidery writing, "From his Affect. Mother, Emily Flowerdew, April 6, 1897."

Next she looked at the sayings of the pagan Emperor, the pages of which were much more worn. Some of the passages were marked, but none seemed of any particular significance. The *History of Rye* was, as she expected, well marked with pencil notes in the margins. She also shook this

book upside down, but nothing fell out except a faded snapshot of Trader's Street taken from outside the Dolphin. There was no inscription on the back of this.

She closed the book and sat for a few moments with her head in her hands. The house was quiet but for the ticking of the grandfather clock in the hall and she realized that she had left the door ajar. What could she have expected to find? Why had she suddenly hoped for just one sign that she had meant something to him? Surely somewhere there was a message for her apart from the cold, legal phrasing of the will?

A Bible, the thoughts of a Roman philosopher and a dull history book were not much comfort to a lonely widow who wanted only a few kind words. She pushed back the chair and as she stood up the heavy, red book crashed to the floor. As it fell it turned over and when she picked it up it was open on the last page. And this usually blank page was covered with the shaky scrawl of a ball-point pen.

Here was the message for which she had been praying. She sat down again and saw that it was indeed in her husband's writing - weak, distorted, and after a few words trailing away as his will and brain could no longer guide his fingers. It was difficult to read, but the first four words were the clearest and meant the most to her:

To my dear wife
I know now that
I should have told you.
Forgive me but I have
told nobody. The rare Rye
Royal manuscript is
hidden in the...

That was all, but it was enough that he did think of her at the end; called her "his dear wife". As the words of this pathetic, unfinished message swam before her eyes, she was overcome by the pent-up emotions of two dreadful months.

Until she felt the arms of Penny round her, time had no meaning. At first she did not even hear what the two girls were saying to her.

"Don't, don't cry like that, Mrs. Flowerdew. Please tell us what we can do to help."

"Shall we go away? Shall I fetch my aunt? Will it help if you tell us what has happened?"

"We only want to help you, Mrs. Flowerdew... You're not alone in the house now..."

After a little she realized that Peter was on her knees beside her clasping one of her hands, and that Penny had one arm round her shoulders. Nobody had comforted her like this since her childhood... "You're not alone now," the pretty fair one whispered. "What's happened? Can you tell us?"

She tried to stifle her sobs and even attempted a smile, and as she looked from one girl to the other she saw that their faces too were wet with tears. So she nodded, felt in vain for a handkerchief and said:

"Don't go away, my dears. I'm so sorry I disturbed you. Please stay. I shall be better in a minute."

With her free hand Peter produced a handkerchief from the pocket of her dressing-gown and passed it to the old lady. After a little she said:

"I do hope that you will both understand, but I have just found in this old book, a message to me from my husband which I think he must have written just before he died. I cannot understand exactly what he means, but I am sure he wants me to share something that was extremely important to him."

Neither of the girls found anything to say until a familiar voice startled them.

"Excuse me," said Mary, standing just inside the door with Macbeth in her arms. "But there was rather a noise and Mackie and me woke up and if we don't close this door the boys will wake up too. Please forgive me, Mrs. Flowerdew, but I couldn't help hearing what you said and I am very, very sorry that you have been unhappy and all of us hope that we can help you. Get down, Mackie darling and go and comfort your hostess."

Macbeth, slowly wagging his tail as he recognized some more of his loved ones, wandered over towards the electric fire and settled down beside it.

Peter got up and Penny wiped her eyes with the back of her hand as she smiled at Mary who had quietly closed the door. She knew that Mary would behave sensibly.

"Of course I forgive you, Mary," Mrs. Flowerdew said. "I'm sorry you were disturbed but you really must go back to bed. We are all coming up now."

Mary, who was now at her brightest and had heard the old lady's explanation of what had happened, went on cheerfully:

"Of course, Mrs. Flowerdew, we don't want to know anything private, but it is only right for us to tell you that we are all quite good at helping people with mysteries. We hope that you will ask us if there is anything we can do. Not just my twin and me, although we've had a lot of practice, but the older ones too. Part of our Christmas is to cheer you up, you know, and that's something we're very keen to do and don't glare at me like that, Peter. I'm sick of glares when I'm talking."

"Thank you very much, Mary," Mrs. Flowerdew smiled. "I'm grateful to you all but you should be back in bed... I want to think all this over, but perhaps there is a mystery and perhaps you will all be able to help me."

With a paper-knife, she cut the page with her husband's message from the book and put the paper in her pocket. Then she got up. "You see, there is something my husband wanted me to know about. He began to write it down - but could not finish it. Please don't ask me what it is now. This evening has been a great shock to me but I am glad you are all here... Thank you all again and please go upstairs as quietly as you can."

She said no more but kissed Penny and Peter shyly, and then switched off the electric fire much to Mackie's disgust, and waited for them to go.

When the three girls looked down into the hall from the first landing, Mrs. Flowerdew was locking the library door behind her and did not look up.

6. Mary's Mistake

Dickie was the first of the Lone Piners to wake next morning. For a few moments the square of dim grey light which was the window did not seem to be in the right place. He turned over and heard a gentle, purring noise from the other corner of the room, and then remembered where he was and that his brother was snoring in the other bed.

They were at thirty-nine Trader's Street in the ancient town of Rye and here for Christmas with the peculiar Mrs. Flowerdew. She certainly was very odd. And sad. It was also obvious that this was not the sort of house in which it was going to be much fun to spend a lot of time. They might be able to decorate it with holly, but all these hints about locked rooms were depressing. He must talk to Mary about it. The two elder couples would be going off by themselves whenever they could and it would never do for the Morton twins to find themselves too involved with Mrs. Flowerdew.

Interesting if James Wilson really turned up at the Dolphin for Christmas. James was a good chap and even when on the job often had time to listen to what an intelligent, keen young journalist had to report. Being married to that nice Judith who understood twins, might make a difference to James, but Dickie was reasonably sure that he would be glad to see them. James would also be interested to know that Richard Morton had chosen his career and might be able to give him a few tips; so with this comforting thought Dickie decided to do some work.

He sat up, switched on his bedside light and reached for his sweater. David's purring continued. Dickie then brought out from under his pillow a shorthand notebook, a ballpoint pen and his watch., The latter told him that the time was twenty minutes past seven and he wondered whether his twin was awake. And that reminded him of something else. At some time in the night he believed he had been disturbed, and his impression was that it was something to do with Mary. This sort of thing still happened between them. When they were younger the link had been stronger, but there were still occasions when each of them knew what the other was thinking and often what the other was going to say before it was said. Sometimes, when one of

them was in real trouble the other was disturbed. Such had not been the case last night, but as Dickie headed the first page of his notebook with the date - Tuesday, Dec. 19th - and then wrote "Events to Record" he decided that presently he must ask Mary what she had been thinking about in the night.

He did not get very far with his "Events".

Arrived at Rye's pathetic station yesterday at teatime. Met by Jonathan and Penelope. First named rather superior as usual and will be sorry one day. Penny looked rather smashing. Was friendly to us and to dog Macbeth. Rye a good place and has recalled certain vital adventures in our lives which must be recorded elsewhere. Main event of yesterday is Mrs. Flowerdew with house where we stay next to Dolphin. She is like a sad old bird which has lost her mate. And peculiar----

At this point David woke up and was unreasonably angry because the light was on. Dickie did not want him to know about "Events" so he pushed the notebook under the bedclothes.

"Will you put out that perishing light and go to sleep," David snarled. "It must be the middle of the night. What do you think you're doing anyway?"

Dickie switched out the light and answered with dignity.

"It is not the middle of the night and you woke me up snoring like a pig. It is not my fault that I am forced to share a room with you against my will. I tried to be polite when the sad news was broken to me yesterday. I have a right to continue my studies if and when I wish to do so----"

David sat up in bed.

"You have a right to do *what*? You must be crazy. You have no right to disturb me, you unspeakable, grubby little brat. Lie down, go to sleep and let me sleep."

Dickie smiled to himself. He enjoyed baiting David and knew that he did not really mean what he was saying. Actually, he was not at all a bad brother and was often very useful. So he lay back with his hands behind his

head and waited until the snoring began again. Then he got up and tip-toed along the corridor to his twin's room and listened at the door. No sound, but when he gently turned the handle he heard Macbeth growl and then his sister's whisper.

"Come in, Dickie. Don't make a row. Got something to tell you. Sit on the bed and wrap yourself in the eiderdown."

Dickie did as he was told after fussing Macbeth who objected to the removal of the eiderdown.

"Thought you'd got something to tell me. In the night wasn't it? What happened and why didn't you call me? This is a very peculiar house."

Mary explained. She did not call him because when Mackie wakened her and she went out into the corridor and heard the voices of Peter and Penny downstairs, she thought it would be better to discover what was happening first.

"If I'd come along to you we should have wakened David, and I could hear, from the stairs, that they were comforting Mrs. Flowerdew so I thought I'd better take Mackie too else he would have made a row. It was awful, Dickie! Mrs. Flowerdew was crying and when we came upstairs again I didn't dare tell you then because of the others... And we did comfort her in a way and she's got a secret, Dickie... You don't blame me do you? I was sure you'd come and see me as soon as you could."

"Tell me what happened before the others wake up and get superior and come butting in. I don't blame you."

She told him of the message left in the history book of Rye, but admitted that Mrs. Flowerdew had not told them what the message was about but that she was pleased to have it.

"But what sort of secret message was it, Mary? D'you mean a code? You can't just lounge there in sloth and not know any more than that."

"But I can and I don't. Don't be ridiculous, Dickie. You wouldn't have found out any better. Although she was crying I'm sure she *was* happy to have this message which she said must have been written not long before her husband died. Although it sounds awful and tragic I know she was glad she'd found it. I asked her if we could help because we're rather good at mysteries and she said perhaps we could. I like her very much, Dickie, although she is peculiar and I think we may be able to co-op!"

"Well, well! Here we go again. Right into a mystery and up the Lone Piners. We just can't help it, but I was thinking, Mary, that if we're not careful the others will try to take control of everything."

"Unless they want to spend all the time going off on their own on secret expeditions," Mary said wisely. "We'll just keep a bit quiet and act a bit silly and maybe we'll be able to find out plenty and help the old lady... Sssh! Those two girls are getting up."

Before she had finished speaking the door opened and Penny eyed them reprovingly.

"Good morning, Gorgeous," Dickie said. "You're looking a bit tousled this morning. I hear you had a disturbed night."

"I came to tell you that we are now going down to get breakfast. Both of you can help because I'm going to take up a tray to Mrs. Flowerdew. I'm sorry you told Dickie what happened last night, Mary. We wanted the three boys to be told at the same time and we thought we could all discuss it in our room at the Dolphin after we'd cleared up here."

"There's no need for you to make plans for us, Penelope," Dickie smirked as he got off the bed. "And may I ask why Jonathan has to come over here and breakfast with us? Quite unnecessary I should have thought and adds to the washing-up. I will acquaint David of the situation. Tell Peter that he was snoring both before and after I left him."

Dickie then returned to his room and woke David gently and courteously with the news that the girls, who were getting breakfast, needed their help. David made no reference to his last awakening and was soon downstairs re-

laying and lighting the kitchen fire. Penny then took up a tray to Mrs. Flowerdew and returned looking rather thoughtful. Jon, in very good form, arrived a few minutes later. When they sat down together Peter looked at Penny who nodded but before either could say anything Dickie charged in.

"May as well tell you chaps now," he began through a mouthful of bacon and fried bread. "You'll have to know sooner or later but something very important happened here last night. Jon couldn't know but David snored through it all... Mrs. Flowerdew had a sort of breakdown after finding a message written by her husband in an old book and it's a mystery but she told me----"

"You little liar," David interrupted. "You couldn't possibly have gone downstairs during the night and not wakened me. And now be quiet. Peter was going to tell me..."

Dickie winked at his twin and subsided after work well done and Peter then told the story. When she had finished, Jon asked Penny how Mrs. Flowerdew was this morning.

"Did she say any more when you took up her breakfast? Didn't tell you what the message was about, I suppose?"

"No, Jon. She was pathetically grateful for being waited on and was asleep when I knocked. I don't think she's ever had breakfast in bed before and she couldn't get over it. I didn't quite know what to say about last night because she didn't refer to it. I told her to stay in bed for a while because we were looking after the house and would wash up before we went out and she just said how grateful she was and that we were 'too kind'. I didn't feel I could ask her any more."

"Of course you couldn't," Peter said loyally. "Didn't she even refer to what happened?"

"No. She was rather odd and I think you must tell your mother about her, Jon. She spoke almost as if our meeting in the library hadn't happened. Perhaps she's not going to mention it again. She must remember that she told us that what was written in that book was her husband's last message,

and that there might be a mystery which we could help her to solve. We saw her tear the message out of the book and put it in her pocket. It's odd, isn't it?"

"Yes," David agreed. "It is odd and she's odd and everything about this house is odd, but although Mrs. Warrender, who is so kind to her, must obviously be told, I've got to say that we can't do anything about this unless Mrs. Flowerdew asks us. I know the old lady was distressed, but we don't know what the message is about, and as she has shown us all that she is eccentric, it just could be that the message is not of any importance to anyone except herself."

"True enough," Jon said. "But I must tell my mother about all this. And I would like to see the library, wouldn't you, David? Shall we ask Mrs. Flowerdew?"

"Certainly not," Penny said hotly. "You just leave the old dear alone. She keeps that room locked and we saw her lock it last night. It was her husband's room and I suppose she wants to keep it as he left it. She's told Mrs. Warrender that Dr. Flowerdew didn't want it touched... When we've washed up I'll go to see her again and tell her that we're all going out. One day perhaps we could ask if you boys could see the library - she's very proud of it - but what I'd like to do this morning is to take you down to Rye Royal and introduce you to Mr. Royal... You little ones can come too if you like because there are lots of books to look at. But no nonsense with him. I like him and sometimes I help him in the coffee bar. We might go there about eleven and I can arrange for the twins to have hot milk."

Without a word to each other or to the others, Richard and Mary got up as one and walked out of the room. They did not look back when they closed the door.

"You've forgotten what they're like, Penny," Peter laughed. "They won't like that about hot milk. Better be on your guard."

Later, when they had cleared up and gone into the Dolphin, they found the twins with Mrs. Warrender. It was at once obvious that they had told her about the discovery of the message, and when the others confirmed what

had happened she advised them not to refer to the matter again or to tell anybody else about it.

"I expect she'll tell me when she's ready to do so, Penny, and as Mary was saying just now you can't offer to do anything about this message until she asks... I suppose you are both convinced that it was a genuine message? I was wondering whether she made it up because she wanted to believe it... Poor old dear."

"I'm sure it was real," Peter said quickly. "It was the finding of it that upset her so much. I'll never forget the way in which she said, 'I'm not sure exactly what he means but I'm sure he wants me to share something that was important to him.' That was what she said, wasn't it, Penny?"

"Yes. Mary heard her too. What do you think it all means?"

"Something hidden in the house," Jon said before his mother could answer. "I should like the chance of searching that library, but of course we can't ask to see it now. She's too upset. See what you can discover, Mum, but we won't bother her, I promise. We're going to see old man Royal now. Penny wants to show him off to the others."

"Not to us, thank you," Dickie said coldly. "Not if the gentleman you so rudely call 'old man Royal' is the proprietor of the Milk Bar where Penelope works."

So Penny had to humble herself and apologize and eventually they all went down to Landgate Street. There were three people in the shop but Mr. Royal, who this morning was wearing what Dickie later described as a "snazzy" green corduroy jacket, smiled a welcome, and left them to look round the shelves without interference.

David and Peter were fascinated by the shop and were soon absorbed in choosing extra Christmas presents for each other. When Mr. Royal's customers had gone, Penny brought him over and introduced her friends and nobody could have been more agreeable. When Peter confessed that she lived in Shropshire and that this was her first visit to Sussex, Mr. Royal went unerringly to a shelf and showed her a book about a woman who, over

thirty years ago, had ridden over her own hills and written of her experiences and of the folk tales of Shropshire (*"Through the Highlands of Shropshire on Horseback"* by Magdalene M. Weale (Heath Cranton, Ltd) 1935.) Peter knew most of these stories because they had been told her by her father for as long as she could remember. She had heard about this book also and now she actually had a copy in her hands. Mr. Royal did not seem surprised when David bought it for her and Peter was quite won over when Mr. Royal presented her, with his compliments and as a souvenir of her first visit to Rye, with an old print of Landgate Street. While this transaction was going on and Penny and Jon were arguing in a corner over something she wanted to give him, the twins and Macbeth were rather bored. Both of them liked books but those in this shop were not really much to their taste and Mary was actually yawning when Mr. Royal came over to speak to them.

"Nice little dog," he smiled as he stooped to pat Macbeth. "Wish I'd got room to keep one but he'd get in people's way down here in the shop and as I live alone in the flat upstairs it's not really fair to keep a lively dog in such conditions, is it? Do you look after this one yourselves? I thought Penelope said you lived in London."

Mary regarded him with interest. More often than not, at a first meeting, this sort of stranger made an idiotic remark about twins and stared at them in surprise. This friendly man actually liked dogs and Mackie seemed to like him. So she explained.

"We do live in London but of course we have to go to school, so we can only look after Macbeth in the holidays. He is a very trusty fighter and while we are in Rye he is going to guard Mrs. Flowerdew at her house in Trader's Street because that is where we are sleeping."

"Would you like to know why he's called Macbeth?" Dickie added to keep the conversation going although he was still bored. Anyway, adults were usually interested in the answer to this question.

"Because he is of noble lineage no doubt, and comes of a line of Scottish kings?" Mr. Royal guessed.

"Partly that, I think," Mary said. "You're nearly right but if you ever listen to those quiz things on the telly you might guess. Our father named him when he was very, very young. Only a princeling really. Can you guess now?"

Mr. Royal clapped a hand to his forehead.

"Of course. How very smart. He was a noisy puppy and your father called him Macbeth because he murdered sleep! Lucky Macbeth to belong to such an intelligent family."

Dickie could not help wondering whether Penny had ever told him this anecdote and neither did he care much for his crack about the intelligent family, but he did not seem a bad sort. And what about this coffee bar?

As if he could read thoughts, Mr. Royal then insisted that Penny should show her friends the Book Cellar and passed her the key.

"Please have coffee on the house and one of you might bring up a cup for me in the office. I'd better stay up here in the hope of some more customers. I need some this week if I'm to have a happy Christmas. Put on a record if you like."

Penny led them down and unlocked the door while David remarked that the people in Rye----

"Ryers, if you please," Jon interrupted. "Not people in Rye."

"Ryers then. I was going to say that Ryers seem to like living underground in cellars and down dank stairs. Where are we going to spend Christmas Day?"

Actually the cellar, even when the shaded lights were switched on and the candles lit, was rather gloomy and cold at this time of the morning and Peter shivered, hoping that Penny would not notice.

"It's more fun when it's full at night," the latter said as she went behind the bar and set out some cups. "We hope you'll all come one evening and meet

some of our friends. I think Mr. Royal is clever and kind and I like to help him. He can't really make any money out of this but it is a good meeting place. Jon is a bit snooty about it, but even he admits that it's a fine bookshop... Put on a disc, Mary. I'm not going to ask you if you like hot milk. Sorry about that. What would Mackie like for his elevenses?"

"Cold milk and a biscuit, please. Don't mention the other matter again. We have decided to overlook it. We rather like your Mr. Royal. He thinks we're intelligent and when his coffee is ready I'll take it up to him."

Dickie went upstairs with her. Mr. Royal was pleased to see them and pleased with himself too because he had just sold an old book of coloured pictures of wild birds for five pounds.

"While I was trying to satisfy that affluent customer," he went on, "I found a book on dogs which would interest you, Mary. I left it out and will show it to you when I've finished this excellent coffee. And what about you, Richard? What is your favourite subject? I dare say I have something you would appreciate."

Dickie did not care for that sort of direct question but Mary answered for him.

"He's going to be a journalist, Mr. Royal. Not many people know yet and he doesn't want it talked about, but if you've got a book that would help him I should like to buy it for him - if we could make a financial arrangement if it's too expensive and which we could discuss in private," she added thoughtfully.

Mr. Royal assured her without a smile that such an arrangement was possible, and that if Richard would care to look through a consignment of books which he had just bought, Mary and he could discuss the matter now. Dickie took the hint and retired to Mr. Royal's packing table in a far corner of the shop and took Macbeth with him.

The bookseller then had a long and friendly conversation with Mary in his office. He gave her a not very valuable book about dogs and asked her to accept it as a Christmas present, and sold her for half-a-crown - which was

all that Mary had - a book called "Short Story Writing for Profit" which was dear at the price. He asked Mary how many times she had been to Rye and told her what a great admiration and respect he had for Mrs. Warrender who ran the Gay Dolphin so efficiently.

"Perhaps she has told you that I often dine there when the hotel is not too busy, but obviously she will be full over the holiday. Mrs. Warrender has been exceedingly kind to Mrs. Flowerdew since her sad loss. Did you not say you were living there?"

Mary explained the situation again and admitted that they had never met the old lady or her husband before.

"No doubt it will be a kindness to the lonely widow for you young people to be sleeping in the house. I hardly know her but I am sorry for her. She came in here a few months ago before the doctor died and I was able to be of some service. She had a few books to sell and although they were of little value it seemed a kindness to buy them. I was surprised because her husband's library would have been of much more interest to me. Dr. Flowerdew was an important man and a considerable scholar, Mary. Nobody knew more about Rye and the Cinque Ports. I am most anxious to see his library and to make an offer for it, but Mrs. Flowerdew will not allow it. Is not that strange? Perhaps as you are living in the house she will allow you to see it one day. I believe she keeps the door locked. That is also unusual."

Mary agreed that the library door was always locked, but that she had seen the inside of the room, and was still talking to the amiable bookseller when Dickie wandered over and suggested they might now go and do some more Christmas shopping. By the time that the twins had thanked Mr. Royal for his gifts - he declined to enter into any financial arrangement with either of them - three customers came into the shop and gave the twins a good opportunity for rejoining the other four in the cellar.

"Don't trouble to explain that you've been making plans to go off by your soppy selves," Dickie said brightly. "We are now polite enough to inform you that although we shall probably meet you all at luncheon we intend to amuse each other for the rest of the day... Good morning all!"

"If we do notice you at luncheon we won't speak to you," Penny laughed. "Don't forget that we all meet in Jon and Penny's room at six o'clock. Have you been buying books, too?"

"These are presentation copies," Mary explained. "From Mr. Royal who appreciates us... Good morning all!"

They did meet at luncheon and did communicate and did go their separate ways - Peter and Penny went off shopping with Mrs. Warrender, David and Jon went in the car to see the two new Nuclear Power Stations at Dungeness and the twins took Macbeth across the levels to the ruins of Camber Castle which was the scene of their first meeting with Jon and Penny.

The tide was out and the slimy banks of the river glistened in the afternoon's pale sunlight. A few gulls squawked and fought over some rubbish in the mud and Macbeth barked his defiance at them. Away to their left the ruin of Henry VIII's castle which never played a part in any battle, rose solitary from the grassy levels.

"Looks just the same, doesn't it?" Mary said. "Still lonely. Like a grey island in a green sea. You'd better remember that sentence, Dickie boy. It was rather good and could be written in one of your notebooks."

But when they reached the castle they saw that it was now surrounded by a high wire fence bearing a notice "Entrance to Public prohibited" and Dickie said he would like to write a protest article about this sort of happening.

"Anyway," he added. "Things and places are hardly ever what they were. I suppose that's another important thing about being a writer. You can help people to remember."

Mary agreed. Although she often tried not to show it she was fiercely and jealously devoted to her twin. To her he could do no wrong and if anybody else thought otherwise she would defend him.

As they walked back, the crimson ball of the sun sank above the rooftops of Rye. The frosty grass crackled under their feet and like the tiny windows

which can be opened day by day in the "Days to Christmas" cards, the lights in the town came up.

"This is one of my favourite things," Mary said. "Coming home in winter. Toast for tea - and all the dark is outside."

Dickie said nothing. He understood.

* * *

They all met later, as arranged, in the smugglers' room. Jon had lit the fire, Peter and Penny had seen to the meal, and the four elder ones had listened with respectful interest to Dickie's description of Camber Castle. When even the latter had confessed that he could eat no more they were interrupted by a knock and Mrs. Warrender's voice. "I've got news for you all... Thank you, Jon dear. No. I can't stay but can you receive guests? Mr. and Mrs. James Wilson have arrived and would like to come and see you. James says he knows the way up here and his pretty wife says she met you in London before they were married... Very well, Penny. Come down with me and escort them."

James Wilson had always been popular with the Lone Piners but had never met Peter. He was a successful and very personable young man with the essential gift of getting on with all sorts of people. Judith, his wife, was beautiful - small and slight with dark blue eyes and ash blonde hair.

She smiled at the twins, patted Macbeth, gave Penny a hug, said hello to the two boys and to Peter, and then looked round and said precisely the right thing.

"What a marvellous room. Jimmy told me about it but I didn't think it would be like this. Thank you very much for letting me see it. How are you all?"

James too had learnt his lesson and did not neglect Macbeth, and then because he thought she looked a little shy he went to speak to Peter who was standing close to David.

"May I call you Peter? I suppose you know the worst about me. David will have told you what we got up to together in London. Now, Richard. What have you been doing? Got a good story for me? You usually have and I always want one. You twins are lucky for me and although I'm on holiday now I still want a story."

"He always wants a story," Judith protested. "Always! I shall never have another holiday unless I go away by myself. I wouldn't even trust this Christmas."

"Neither would we," Dickie said promptly. "We've got a story, James. I haven't told you yet but I'm going to be a journalist and I'll help you with the story of Mrs. Flowerdew who lives next door where we're sleeping. Her husband died and she's very poor but she's got a fantastic secret and----"

"Steady, Richard! Steady!" James said. "You know how glad I will be to have you help me but did you say *Flowerdew*? It sounded like Flowerdew."

"Of course it did. That's her fabulous name."

"Is that so. And what is her fantastic secret?"

And so between them the Lone Piners told the Wilsons the story of the widow and of last night's discovery of the message in the book from Dr. Flowerdew's bedside. Penny told them of how Mrs. Warrender, convinced of the old lady's poverty, had done what she could to help her and that was one reason why they were sleeping in the house.

"But this message in the book," James persisted. "Do you know what it was? Was it good news or bad? Of course anything you do to help, or any help that friends of Mrs. Warrender can give her is worthwhile, but is she really so poor, Penny? Not just odd and mean?"

"We think she is poor and so does my aunt. Mrs. Flowerdew is eccentric and always has been and so was her husband. Several people think he was a clever and important man. I think that he was mean and selfish and unkind and thoughtless to his wife. We don't know what the message says but she told us that he hadn't time to finish it. He died alone in the night of a heart

attack, you see. We're sure that she was pleased to have the message and we all believe that she needs money badly."

"Then why doesn't she sell the house which must be worth a lot?"

"Because her husband told her not to."

"This is very interesting, Penelope dear, but it isn't yet a story for me. Do you think that her husband's last message could alter everything for her? Has it anything to do with money?"

"Or a treasure or some hidden loot?" Dickie said. "What we've got to find out is what the message is about."

"I told her last night that we were good at mysteries," Mary reminded them. "I think she likes us but she hasn't told us what the message was about - except that it was important."

"What do you think, Penny?" Jon said. "You were there and you see what James is after, don't you? Was she relieved because the message might mean that her financial worries are over?"

"Or perhaps that after all she can sell up?" David suggested.

Penny put her hands to her head.

"Oh dear! It seems awful discussing her like this. I'm sorry we told you now because we may be making too much of it... No. That's not right. She was distressed and although she hasn't told us what the unfinished message was she did imply that it was very important. I'm sure she trusts us and *will* tell us when she's ready, but she wouldn't say any more when I took her breakfast up this morning."

"I see." James got up and stood before the fire. "Have you told Mrs. Warrender about the message?"

"Mary and I told her this morning," Dickie said.

"My mother knows all about it," Jon agreed. "I believe this mysterious message could refer to something hidden in the house next door. It's that sort of house and he was that sort of man as Penny says."

Judith gave an opinion for the first time. "Your mother seems to know the old lady better than any of you. What does she say?"

"She said we mustn't tell *anybody*," Penny admitted. "Maybe we shouldn't have told you?"

"Just a sec," Jon said as he unexpectedly got up and polished his glasses. "I see what James is after. He's wondering whether this mysterious message is the sort of thing somebody else would like to know. I was half joking when I said just now that it might refer to something hidden in the house. Maybe it really could? And there is something else we haven't told you, James. On Rye Fawkes Night, which is the nearest Saturday to November 5th, Penny and I spent the week-end here to see the Bonfire celebrations. My mother asked Mrs. Flowerdew to spend the evening with her and while her house was empty it was broken into. The thief tried to break into old Dr. Flowerdew's study which was locked and which she still keeps locked. That same night one of our friends saw another chap - one of the Bonfire Boys disguised as a Red Indian - fiddling about with a locked door of a coffee bar belonging to a man with a bookshop whom we know very well. The police never got Mrs. Flowerdew's visitor but isn't it a coincidence that he wanted to see what was in the study next door? Perhaps there is a story here, James? Maybe we really have got involved in something and if anybody outside this room - except my mother - even mentions what we know of this mysterious message then Mrs. Flowerdew might be in danger... Is that what you mean, James?"

"You've made it sound dramatic, Jon, but there could be something in what you say. We'll think it over, but meanwhile we must all be certain not to mention last night's incident to anybody. And Mrs. Warrender should perhaps warn Mrs. Flowerdew not to say a word and to put that piece of paper in the bank, unless it's a personal message to her and not of value to anybody else... Sorry to sound dramatic in my turn but you do all see why, don't you? It really is important that not a soul outside knows about this

message until we're sure it's harmless. Can you all be positive that you haven't mentioned this to anyone?"

A long silence, during which they considered the gravity of James's warning, was broken by Mary. She had been sitting on the floor by the fire and now she slowly got to her feet and faced James. Her face was white and her voice shook as she spoke.

"I've got to tell you all. You must know, and I'm very, very sorry but I told Mr. Royal today about the finding of that message and of how we tried to help Mrs. Flowerdew. Of course he *likes* Mrs. Flowerdew very much and is interested in the library. He's a kind man but perhaps I'd better go and see him in the morning and make him promise not to tell anybody else."

7. Holford Court

Next morning at about eleven o'clock, when several customers were in the shop, Mr. Royal received an unexpected and important telephone call.

In spite of the Christmas season he was not feeling particularly festive, although the information he managed to extract from Mary Morton yesterday had confirmed his belief that there was something valuable hidden in Mrs. Flowerdew's house. For three months he had been uneasy because he had heard no more of the man who called himself Harry Purvis. He was under no illusions about this man and feared him greatly. He had been told to write to a London address as soon as he could provide the sort of information Purvis was demanding, but had not been able to report anything. For a few days he had wondered whether he would close up the shop and try to disappear. To get abroad somewhere and start afresh. With his knowledge of old books and antiques he should be able to make a living in the United States, but he put off making an attempt which might tempt Purvis to report him to the police. Every time the telephone rang he wondered whether he was going to be summoned to an interview. Every post might bring an order and often he felt that he was being watched. He had tried to comfort himself with the thought that Purvis had forgotten him - that he was too insignificant to worry about - but deep down he knew that this was wishful thinking. He had managed to visit several houses in the district in the course of his business, but none of them had turned out to be the homes of really wealthy people. The books he had been offered were of no great value, and although he always subtly suggested that the owners might have something else for sale he had never been lucky. He had written polite letters to the owners of a few really big mansions, suggesting that they might have some family treasures to sell discreetly, but had no luck.

As the weeks passed, he tried to delude himself that if he waited long enough the chance to gain an entry into a suitable house would come in the normal course of business. All that was required was patience.

And then on this Wednesday morning before Christmas the call came when he was least expecting it.

"Am I speaking to Mr. Roy Royal, if you please?" came a woman's cultured voice as he announced himself.

"Yes, madam. To whom am I speaking?"

"I do hope this is not an inconvenient time to ask your advice and help. This is Mrs. Peregrine Baxter of Holford Court speaking... Yes, Holford Court at Hurstcombe near Lewes, Mr. Royal. I expect you know it... Yes, I thought you would... I hardly like to ask you at such short notice but I have decided to go away to find some sunshine before Christmas..."

Here the charming lady paused and Royal wondered what he was supposed to say - or do.

"Yes, indeed, Mrs. Baxter, but if I can be of assistance I shall be only too pleased. Are you perhaps looking for any particular book or old print for a Christmas gift before you leave? I could post anything direct for you."

"No, Mr. Royal. That is not the situation. Your name has been given to me by several friends whose opinion I value. I realize that you have not been in this part of the country very long and you may not know that I recently lost my husband..."

Royal made the appropriate noises of sympathy. He wondered if his luck was about to turn. A wealthy widow now ready to dispose of something valuable?

"... Thank you, Mr. Royal. The point is that I wish to dispose of my late husband's library. I am afraid that his large collection of books never meant as much to me as it did to him... He was many years my senior."

"You would like me to come over and value the library, Mrs. Baxter? I shall be delighted. I am usually able to make an offer for collections as important as your husband's. May I ask if any other expert has seen it?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Royal. I have been told how knowledgeable you are and I would rather have your opinion now than ask somebody down from

London. I am sure that you are discreet. You will understand that I do not want it generally known that I am disposing----"

Mr. Royal was thinking fast. This could be the break he needed, and although it might not seem to be good business to close Rye Royal so near to Christmas, he must risk anything to get to Holford Court as quickly as possible.

"Of course I understand the situation, Mrs. Baxter. How soon would you like me to come? Would this afternoon be convenient? No doubt you would like an indication of the value of the library before you leave for the Bahamas?"

He was aware that she had not mentioned where she was going but felt that she would not be offended by a suggestion of something expensive and luxurious. She did not deny the West Indies.

"That would be very kind, Mr. Royal. I feared you might be too busy at this time of the year."

"I am busy, Mrs. Baxter, but I might arrange to leave my business this afternoon. May I telephone you within the hour? It will be a pleasure to meet you."

She gave him the number and he replaced the receiver with a sigh of satisfaction and went out into the shop to serve his customers. While taking the money from the last of these with an apology for keeping her waiting, he had his bright idea. He now had two prospects - the first being something worthwhile which he had always suspected at thirty-nine Trader's Street and the other at Holford Court which might well offer greater possibilities. The latter, although he had never heard of it, was almost certainly the sort of place in which Purvis would be interested. Even if the library was of little value, the house itself might contain valuables worth attention and Royal was sure that there would soon be trouble if he did not report something to London. When he reported on Holford Court there would be no need to mention the clever old Dr. Flowerdew. He was sure that the child who told him of the widow's discovery was telling the truth. It would pay him to keep in touch with the young people and somehow or other gain access to

the house. Pity that the old lady had proved so stubborn. Then he had another good idea. No need to close the shop if the Warrender cousins would come and look after it this afternoon. They might be glad to earn a little pocket money before Christmas or Jonathan might prefer to choose a few books. Royal would have liked to have walked up now to Trader's Street with the excuse that he wanted to ask their help and try to get into thirty-nine, but two more people came into the shop. Twenty minutes had passed by the time he had dealt with these and was able to telephone the Dolphin and ask for Jonathan.

Royal could be persuasive and tactful when he liked and started by asking for help because he had to go out on business this afternoon. Jon did not sound keen and went to find Penny who was more enthusiastic. Eventually it was agreed that the Warrenders would look after the shop from two o'clock with the help, if required, of David and Petronella and that the four would run the Book Cellar in the evening.

Royal, well-satisfied with this arrangement, then rang Mrs. Baxter. On this occasion the telephone was answered by a man who, with a slight accent, announced that he would "fatch madam". The fact that Mrs. Baxter kept a manservant suggested that she maintained a big establishment.

"I appreciate your kindness, Mr. Royal. It is good of you to come out at such short notice, but I am sure that you will not be wasting your time. I shall expect you at any time after three o'clock and you will of course stay as long as you wish. I hope you will not wish to hurry away. I look forward to meeting you..."

This sounded promising, and at one o'clock when he closed the shop for the lunch hour Royal went upstairs to his flat in high hopes. As was his usual custom he drank a glass of sherry and cooked himself a chop.

He had not admitted to Mrs. Peregrine Baxter that he did not know where Holford Court was. Lewes, about thirty miles away, he had visited once or twice, but he did not want to waste time asking people the way. In fact, he did not want anyone to know where he was going because he had not yet definitely decided whether he was going to tell Purvis. He must wait and see whether Mrs. Baxter really was a prospect. So, having finished his

chop, he found amongst his collection of one-inch Ordnance Maps covering the counties of Sussex and Kent the sheet that showed Lewes. Without much difficulty he found a small village called Hurstcombe on the outskirts of which Holford Court was marked. This also pleased him because it proved that the house must be of some significance, so he put the map in his pocket, fetched a smart tweed overcoat and went downstairs to the shop. The Warrenders had not yet arrived so, thinking that it might be an agreeable gesture to welcome them with a cup of coffee, he unlocked the door to the Cellar and went down to start the percolator. He had no qualms about leaving his business in the hands of these young people, but it did occur to him that it would be unwise to tell *anyone* where he was going.

Jon and Penny arrived a few minutes later and Royal was at his most gracious.

"It really is uncommonly kind of you two to help me in this predicament and I do hope you won't be too bored. The prices of everything are clearly marked, and if anybody comes in with something to sell will you kindly explain that I shall be here tomorrow but am not really interested in buying anything until after Christmas. Make yourselves some tea - there's coffee ready downstairs now as I thought you'd like a cup - and don't keep open after six."

"What about the Book Cellar, Mr. Royal?" Penny asked. "Will you be back before we open tonight? Our friends want to come and we might do some business."

"I don't know when I shall be back, my dear, so you may open when you wish. As a gesture of my appreciation I would like to suggest that any takings in the Cellar be divided between you. Even if I have returned, I shall stay upstairs unless you want me. The evening and the Cellar is yours, and tomorrow I would like to find you both a further souvenir. You have been a great help to me... The till - rather a quaint, old-fashioned affair - is, as you know, in my office. Here are the keys of the shop and the Cellar door, Jonathan. I have duplicates. Is there anything special you would like to ask me before I go?"

Jon did not think so. He still was not very keen on this chore. He had only agreed because keeping shop seemed to amuse Penny, but there were plenty of books to look at if they were not busy. Royal was an odd chap but he was not mean, and anyway Penny and he would be together and there had not been much chance of that since the Mortons arrived.

"You'd better have coffee too, before you go, Mr. Royal," Penny suggested. "I don't know how far you're going but it looks like snow. I'll go down and get it now and you go into your office and relax. And don't you worry about a thing."

He was not anxious, but he was excited, because he felt strongly that Mrs. Peregrine Baxter was the break in bad fortune which he had been waiting for ever since the unpleasant "Mr. Purvis" had come into his life. So he smiled his thanks to Penny and retired to his little glass-fronted office from which he could see the door and most of the shop.

It was while he was enjoying the first sip of coffee that he had his first doubts about Mrs. Peregrine Baxter. Not exactly doubts perhaps, but was he not taking her existence too much for granted? She had said that he had been recommended to her by friends but had not mentioned their names. True that he had her telephone number to which she had already answered, and that he had found Holford Court on the map, but it might perhaps be a good idea to check her name and address in a street Directory - or even the Telephone Directory - before he set out.

Royal kept several Telephone directories in his office, and soon checked that Lewes numbers were in the Brighton book. Mrs. Baxter might be under P or B. As he turned to the latter he was holding the silver pencil which he always carried. He absentmindedly drank some coffee. As usual, Penny had put sugar in the saucer but had not provided a spoon. She always forgot, so, as he did not want to protest, Royal stirred with the pencil and then put it between the pages of the directory as Penny interrupted him with a question about the price of a book. He followed her over to the shelves, told her what she wanted to know, returned to the office and resumed his search. There were plenty of Baxters as he checked down the column with the pencil but with relief he soon found "Baxter, Peregrine Mrs." with the number and address which she had given to him. He put the directory back on the shelf

and the pencil in his pocket and then finished his coffee and picked up his coat.

"My thanks and good luck to you both. I'm glad to leave you in charge, Jonathan, and although your friends are welcome here it would be advisable if only Penelope and yourself attend to customers unless you are very hard pressed. If you have the time please keep a record of what you sell... And the Cellar is yours tonight. *Au revoir.*"

It was cold outside and he noticed that the sky to the south-east above the Marsh was thick with heavy clouds. The journey west through beautiful wooded country behind the resorts of Hastings, Bexhill and Eastbourne was uneventful. He now felt very optimistic for it was unthinkable that a widow like Mrs. Baxter living in what was surely a small mansion should not be wealthy. There was every chance surely that Holford Court would contain something of value, and the fact that the widow wanted to sell her late husband's library was not an uncommon fact of life as he had noticed before. Unfortunately Mrs. Flowerdew was an exception, but whatever transpired this afternoon Royal was now determined to keep his hopes about Trader's Street to himself. He had a hunch that the clever old doctor was just the sort of recluse with a reputation of specialized scholarship who would have something valuable hidden in that old house.

It was nearly dark when he turned into a lane signposted "Hurstcombe" which, as the map suggested, was little more than a hamlet with only one shop. He stopped outside the latter and asked a woman the way to Holford Court. She looked at him and at his Mini curiously before she directed him. Five minutes later he turned in between two wrought-iron gates set in a fine wall of Sussex flints and drove up to the big house about two hundred yards from the road. The drive was not in very good condition and it was not light enough to see whether the grounds were well kept, but as he swung round to the stone-pillared porch his headlights showed him that Holford Court was an old and impressive building in good repair. He got out of the car, stretched, and looked back the way he had come. Against the dark skies to the south he saw the gentle curve of the Downs and above them a solitary star. As he turned to the porch to look for the bell-push a few flakes of snow

fell on his face. Then a light flashed on above the great oak door which was opened by a man in a black jacket and striped trousers.

The man was not much like the old-fashioned English butlers seen in old films on television. He was swarthy with a dark shadow of stubble on his chin and so thick set that his jacket looked too tight.

"Come in, if you please, Mr. Royal," he said, with the same slight accent which Royal had noticed on the telephone.

As he stepped over the threshold into a big hall, Royal said "Good afternoon," and added a few words about the weather which were not even acknowledged by the man as he took his coat. Royal would have liked a few more moments to look round, but he was satisfied with what he was able to see before the man led him across the stone-flagged floor.

"Madam expects you," he said, unsmilingly, and, without knocking, opened one of three doors on that side of the hall. "Mr. Royal has arrived," he announced.

Before he stepped forward to meet his hostess, Royal realized two curious things. The first was that his arrival had been noticed before he rang the bell and the second that the man's shirt cuffs which showed below the sleeves of his tight jacket were frayed and dirty. Then the door closed behind him and he saw that he was in a magnificent library, the walls of which were lined with books. A wood fire was smouldering on an enormous hearth, in one wall were three unshuttered windows presumably looking out on to the terrace where he had left his car, and down the centre of the room was a big oak table, at one end of which was a silver tea-tray. As he stepped forward a woman, who had been sitting on a leather settee before the fire, got up and smiled a welcome, and he at once recognized the voice that had spoken to him on the telephone a few hours ago.

"How very kind of you to come at such short notice, Mr. Royal. Come and warm yourself after your journey and take a cup of tea with me."

He bowed over her hand, noticing with appreciation as he did so two fine diamond and platinum rings. She was smaller than he had expected and

dressed in tweeds. Difficult to guess her age but not likely to be more than fifty. Her well-dressed hair was tinted a silvery-grey and what he noticed more than anything else was that her face was curiously smooth and her wide, pale-blue eyes were almost expressionless. During their ensuing conversation, when she sat a few feet away from him, he found himself wondering more than once what was going on in the brain behind those blank eyes. The voice was always pleasant but, after a little, he realized that he was being cross-examined. Mrs. Baxter was polite and agreeable enough but she was insatiably curious, and time and time again as he answered her questions he looked up to see those cold blue eyes fixed on his face.

"But do tell me, Mr. Royal, about your fascinating shop. I have heard about it, and of course I know that it isn't an ordinary shop. Such a clever name you've given it too. After your own name, of course. Tell me whether your customers are curious about your name?"

"It is an unusual name, Mrs. Baxter, but I don't recall that anybody who comes into the shop has ever expressed curiosity about it. Not to my face, anyhow."

"Of course not. I just wondered. And are you doing well, Mr. Royal? I know you have not been in Rye for long but you seem to be getting well-known, and I do so think that such an original business deserves success. No doubt you have some very interesting and cultured people amongst your customers... Do you?"

"I do not know the names of all those who come to me, Mrs. Baxter. My business is personal. At present I have no assistant, but I find that most of those who come to buy and some who want to sell are cultured people. I should be happier if more came to buy."

"Of course. No doubt it is just that one has a fellow feeling for those who cherish old and beautiful things, and I was thinking that you must find your business a pleasant way of meeting influential people. Is that so, and have you discovered many treasures amongst what is brought to you to buy?"

Royal laughed politely.

"I have not had much luck yet. Perhaps when I am permitted to look round these shelves I may be more fortunate."

"I hope so too. Tell me, Mr. Royal. Is it not particularly interesting for you to go round the country visiting other people's houses? As you are today, I mean... Here we are, chatting like old friends about old books and other treasures and it fascinates me that this is your business. Have you met many of my friends in this way? I confess that I am curious."

As Royal helped himself to a cucumber sandwich, he wondered what impertinent question he was going to be asked next. Even if he had visited any really important houses recently, it was not likely that he would disclose details of his business with other people to this extraordinary woman. So politely he tried to change the subject, but she laughed - not a very merry laugh - and said:

"That was naughty of me, Mr. Royal, but like most women I am curious and would like to know if any of my county neighbours were discreetly trying to dispose of their libraries - or anything else." Then she added abruptly, "Are you interested in purchasing antiques and old jewellery besides old books?"

"I might be, madam. It all depends on what I am offered. I am most grateful for your hospitality but time is passing and perhaps I should now examine the books. Was your late husband interested in any special subject? I believe that you are off to sunnier climes very shortly and would like an offer from me quickly. When are you leaving and would it be possible for me to pay a second visit in your absence?"

He was careful to refer to an offer and not to a cash payment.

"Now you are being curious, Mr. Royal. I must tell you that I was never particularly interested in my late husband's library but I am sure that you, as an expert, will not take long to form an opinion. After you have examined the books you can tell me whether you wish to come again. I may leave before Christmas and I do not know when I shall return, but this house is never left empty in the winter when I am abroad... Now let us ask Jules to

put up the shutters and remove this tray and you can start work. Is there anything else you require?"

She rang for the man who came in with a scowl, switched on all the lights, put more logs on the fire, pulled wooden shutters across the windows and drew the curtains. Meanwhile Royal produced his silver pencil and a notebook and began to look at the books. As Jules, who had not spoken since he came in, took the tea-tray to the door, Royal turned to say that there was nothing more he needed. Before he could speak he noticed that Mrs. Baxter, standing by the table, glanced at her wrist-watch and then raised her eyebrows questioningly to the servant who shook his head before leaving the room.

Royal was not really embarrassed but he was puzzled by the behaviour of this odd woman.

"There is nothing I need, thank you, Mrs. Baxter. Please do not let me detain you as it may take me an hour or more to value your husband's books. And I do assure you that I feel very privileged to do so."

"Not at all, Mr. Royal. I shall try not to interrupt you, but because I am a curious woman I shall enjoy watching you work," and she sat down on the sofa, lit a cigarette and watched him with her cold blue eyes.

Five minutes later Royal had his first surprise, because it was obvious that unless some really good books were hidden away somewhere the late Mr. Peregrine Baxter had no taste for literature nor any knowledge of the value of old books. This was puzzling because this was a magnificent room and the shelves, from floor to ceiling, were packed with books. But not valuable books, just the ordinary sets of Dickens, Scott and the Victorian poets which were the sort Royal declined to buy almost every working day. Did Mrs. Baxter know, he wondered? Was she expecting him to disillusion her or did she really think that he would pay her well for this rubbishy collection? Of course he must examine every shelf carefully, but it looked as if, from one point of view, he was wasting his time.

He walked across the room to fetch the ladder which would enable him to examine the highest shelves and realized that she was still watching him.

Then he heard a car approach and stop outside.

She got up and threw her cigarette in the fire.

"You look worried, Mr. Royal. No doubt you will get on better without me so I will leave you now. Please prepare a careful report on the library as I am anxious to have your opinion as soon as possible."

It did not take Royal more than twenty minutes to confirm his first suspicions. There was nothing of real value here, but when he remembered her questions - particularly her wish to know whether he was interested in buying antiques and jewellery - he wondered whether she had something else to sell and for some extraordinary reason was trying him out on this rubbish. And it had all happened so quickly. Why had she wanted him to come at once? And then another most unpleasant thought struck him. *Was all this a plan to get him away from Rye this afternoon?*

He crossed to the fireplace and rang for the servant. He must tell Mrs. Baxter the truth and then get home as soon as possible. He fidgeted about the room for a minute or two and then rang again. No reply. Very well then, he must go himself and find Mrs. Baxter. The door was locked from the outside. He banged on the panels and hurt his clenched fists. He went back to the fireplace and kept his finger on the bell-push for a long minute. Then he panicked and rushed over to the windows and struggled with the shutters and the iron bars that held them in position.

His hands were wet with perspiration as he tugged at them in vain, and he was fighting for breath as he heard the click of the lock in the door behind him. As he wheeled round ready to curse the servant, Mrs. Baxter came in followed by the man he knew as Harry Purvis.

"What *are* you doing, Mr. Royal? Surely you aren't trying to open my windows? How very odd! You should have rung for Jules. I think the time has come for you to meet my brother. He will be interested to know how much you are going to give me for my books."

Royal stared at them both in astonishment. Purvis kept his hands in his pockets and there was no trace of an American accent as he said brusquely:

"Sit down somewhere, Johnnie Jones and don't stand there gawping. I know I should offer you a glass of sherry wine, but I'm not going to waste my time... What the blazes have you been up to since I saw you last? Surely you were not such a fool as to think I was bluffing? Why haven't you reported? You can't expect me to believe that you've done nothing and got no information. Now listen. Your car has been removed, and as you are not likely to have told anybody that you were coming here it's safe to assume that nobody knows where you are - until I tell the police. Does anybody know where you are? Answer me, you little rat!"

Royal shook his head. He knew this man and his reputation and was sure that somehow or other he must get back to Rye, try to clear up his affairs and get out of the country before he was betrayed to the police. Fear made his brain work quickly. There was no chance now of trying to trick him. He had only one card to play and decided to play it.

"No use trying to bully me," he said as firmly as he could after putting his hands in his pockets so that the other should not see them shaking. "You haven't heard from me because there was no sense in letting you know I was on the trail of something until I was sure. Rye is a small place and that business of mine, as you have seen, has got its uses. I've got to play the game as it suits me best else we shan't get anywhere. It's no use you playing tricks like this on me. You've got to give me your confidence and----"

"Get on with it, Jones. Cut out all the nonsense. There's only one way you can keep out of gaol and that is to tell me what you've been doing and what you know. You're not putting on a bad show now but you're wasting your breath. *What do you know?* If you value your freedom you will tell me before you leave this room what you've been doing besides messing about in your ridiculous shop. What contacts have you made? What information have you got for me?"

"Very well. Directly after Christmas when I was sure, I was planning to contact you but didn't want to do so until I had better proof than I have at present. There was no use in writing to you about day to day efforts to get on to something worthwhile. You're too busy to be worried with trifles and so, for that matter, am I."

"What do you know?"

"Yesterday I was given a clue to what I am reasonably sure is a genuine Elizabethan document hidden in the house of a historian called Flowerdew at thirty-nine Trader's Street, Rye. That's what I know."

"Do you, though? Tell me more, Johnnie boy. Tell me more."

8. The Widow Vanishes

Although they had expected to be left to amuse themselves fairly frequently, the twins pretended to take a poor view of the way in which the others went off to Rye Royal for the afternoon.

Jon and Penny left first, but it was obvious that David and Peter had planned to go off together before joining them in Landgate Street later.

"You two don't really mind being on your own, do you?" Peter said. "David wants me to help him do some shopping for his mother and I've still to get my present for Mrs. Warrender."

"Not at all! Not at all!" Dickie replied with a malevolent glare at his brother. "Don't you worry about us. If there's one thing we don't want to do it's to hang about in that musty old shop."

"And it's not for us to suggest who is being really selfish on this holiday," Mary added. "We just love to see you two - and Jon and Penny who are also reunited - enjoying yourselves. What we're not so keen on----"

"Or appreciative of----" the young journalist interrupted.

"----is the way in which the four of you smugly make plans without even consulting us. If we weren't hardened by your selfish treatment of us we should be deeply hurt."

"And another thing," Dickie added triumphantly.

"Just one other impertinent point----"

"Pertinent, brother," David grinned. "Get it right, boy."

"Just one other vital thing, Petronella. You seem to have overlooked the fact that David's mother is also our mother and we might be able to help with advice as to her Christmas gift. But you two go off now and maybe we'll follow you to the shops so that we shall be available if required."

Peter laughed.

"Come and see us off then, and don't get into trouble while we're away. And you might both be thinking up a plan for doing something all together tomorrow. It really is true about shopping, Mary - and after all you do see more of David than I do."

So the twins gave Macbeth a run and walked to the end of Trader's Street with the others. When they were out of sight Dickie said what Mary was thinking.

"They're O.K. We're lucky to have Peter and I don't really blame them for going off like that. I've got an idea, Mary, and I'd rather it was something we tackled by ourselves. Do you know what it is?"

"Mrs. Flowerdew and the secret message, of course. You think we should go and see her and try to help her, don't you? I thought you did. Let's go now."

The door of thirty-nine was unlocked and they walked straight in.

"Mrs. Flowerdew! We've come to see you," Mary called. "Where are you?"

Silence as they stood in the dim, grim hall.

"It's Richard and Mary Morton," Dickie shouted.

The kitchen door at the end of the passage opened suddenly, but the light was behind Mrs. Flowerdew and it was difficult to see her clearly. For a few moments it seemed as if she did not recognize them and then Mary ran to her.

"It's only us, Mrs. Flowerdew. We're on a cheering-up mission. The others have gone off by themselves. We've brought Mackie because he's taken to you and you're kind to him."

"Come in, my dears. I was having a little snooze but you're welcome - and so is the dog."

Macbeth licked her hand as she stooped to greet him and then he settled down on the hearthrug. It was true that he liked Mrs. Flowerdew, and as the twins stood side by side looking at the old lady they both suddenly felt a rush of affection for her. Perhaps this was because she seemed so lonely? Mary, of course, had seen her with her defences down, and although Dickie was not there at the time, he was sensitive enough, now that he had seen her again, to appreciate a little of what she had suffered. So, with a gesture that pleased her, he pulled her chair a little nearer the fire.

"You just sit down here, Mrs. Flowerdew," he said. "We didn't really want to interrupt you and we don't want you to think that we're interfering, but we really do mean that we'd like to help you if we can. Specially after Monday night."

Mrs Flowerdew sat up very straight and spoke sharply. "What *do* you mean, Richard? Why after Monday night?"

For just a moment Dickie was embarrassed.

"We hope you won't think we're nosey or rude about this. Mary and I share everything, and she told me about what happened on Monday night - of how you found a message from Dr. Flowerdew... Please don't be upset about us knowing but we couldn't help it and we - Mary and me - hoped that perhaps you could tell us a bit more about this message if you thought that by talking and sharing it with us we could help... You did tell the others that the message wasn't finished, didn't you?"

Dickie was rather pink as he finished his little speech but he returned Mrs. Flowerdew's astonished stare bravely.

"Please don't be angry with us," Mary pleaded. "What Dickie says is true and we really have helped to solve some mysteries before now. Almost our very first, when we met Jon and Penny, was at the Dolphin when we were staying there... So please don't think we are just being curious."

Mrs. Flowerdew stood up.

"Who else knows about Monday night? With whom have you all been discussing my private affairs?"

"Just ourselves and not really *discussing*," Dickie admitted, forgetting that they had told James and Judith. "The girls had to tell Jon and David, and of course Mrs. Warrender knows, and we're surprised she hasn't been to see you but she's really hectic in the hotel... And if you're not too mad with us and if it's not a strictly private thing and we swear not to tell anybody else we would like to see this message."

"On Monday night you did say that perhaps we should be able to help you over the message that wasn't finished... You really did, Mrs. Flowerdew, and that's why we have reminded you."

The old lady smiled.

"So I did, Mary. So I did. Perhaps I'm being a silly old woman keeping everything to myself. If I don't know what my husband wanted to tell me I'm sure you won't, but as you like mysteries I will show you the message. I keep it in my handbag and so far I haven't decided what to do about it. Mary will remember that it was written on the last blank pages of a book about Rye. I don't think my husband altogether approved of what Mr. Holloway wrote in the book but then, you see, the Doctor was a very clever man and a great scholar and very critical of other historians. Do you like history at school?"

They both nodded enthusiastically. Fortunately she had not asked whether they enjoyed maths.

"Splendid! Although my husband didn't really approve of immature minds he would have been glad to know that you both liked history... Now you may see the message."

She rummaged in an old handbag and produced the yellowing paper on which her dying husband's scrawl straggled across the page. As they looked over her shoulder she read the words aloud:

To my dear wife
I know now that
I should have told you.
Forgive me but I have
told nobody. The rare Rye
Royal manuscript is
hidden in the...

"There you are, my dears. That is the mystery and my secret. You probably do not know that the first Queen Elizabeth once visited this town and gave it the name of Rye Royal. My husband was most interested in this period and it is possible that he has found something relating to it... No, please don't touch the paper, Richard. I said I would show it to you, but now I am going to put it away again."

"But this is utterly fabulous, Mrs. Flowerdew," Dickie gasped. "It's fantastic. It's a vital clue. He says it's rare and he says it's hidden. Can't you guess, Mrs. Flowerdew, where it's hidden? Have you looked?"

"Perhaps it's in your fabulous library?" Mary suggested. "Could we help you to search for it, if you can't guess?"

Mrs. Flowerdew closed her handbag with a snap.

"You may *not* search the library. I do not allow anybody in there. This is not a game."

"That's O.K. by us," Dickie said excitedly. "I mean we won't do anything you don't want but I've just had an amazing idea. Have you got any secret passages or smugglers' hiding places in this house? You're next to the Dolphin and I s'pose you know that's got a secret room and a secret place that we helped to find! Honestly we did... And what about cellars? Maybe you've got cellars like the Dolphin's-----"

"Please, please don't shout at me, Richard. I'm beginning to wish that I hadn't told you. You must not get so excited and upset me. I know of no secret passages or hiding places in this house. There are probably cellars but we never used them and my husband bricked up the door that leads down to them many years ago... Now please calm down, Richard."

Dickie could barely contain himself but his twin gave him a warning glance.

"Thank you for showing us," Mary said. "We do understand that this is sort of private, but perhaps later on if you decide to do some searching we might be able to help. It would be better to have someone you know to help you, wouldn't it? Better than asking strangers, I mean."

"Yes, Mary, it would. You are a sensible girl and under no circumstances will I have strangers prying round my house. That Mr. Royal for instance. For months, even before my dear husband left me, that man has been badgering me to let him see the library. I won't have it - certainly not anybody who keeps a shop," she added to the twins' astonishment.

"But you wouldn't forget us when you're ready to search, would you?" Dickie pleaded. "Mrs. Warrender will tell you how we all helped her to find the Dolphin's treasure. It would be super if we could do the same for you."

"Thank you very much, Richard, but I don't want anything done about this at present. We'll think about it after Christmas. Don't worry about it any more. I've let you into my secret and all you young people have cheered me up immensely, but if something rare is hidden here it can stay hidden a little longer. I'm not going to turn my house upside down now. I've had one attempted burglary here on Rye Fawkes night when I was a guest of Mrs. Warrender in the Dolphin. A thief got in through the kitchen window and tried to force his way into the library but I always lock that door and he couldn't manage it. Something scared him I suppose. It was one of the Bonfire Boys dressed as a Red Indian. They always have Indians."

Dickie was fascinated. "How do you know? You didn't see him, did you?"

"Oh no. I found a clue in the hall. A feather from an Indian head-dress. I showed it to the police and I suppose they followed it up, but they never found out who it was. I suppose if somebody got into the house once they could do it again. That's why I never go out for long now and why I'm glad you're all here at night. No, my dears. I don't want anything else done about my husband's message at present. Much better not. I've had enough upsets and I want us all to have a happy Christmas here, so you won't bother me any more about it, will you?"

She stood up and Mary realized that the interview was over.

"Good-bye for the present then, Mrs. Flowerdew. We'll see you tonight about half-past nine, and thank you very much for showing us the secret message. Would you like Mackie to stay and guard you? We could spare him if he would comfort you and as you are alone in the house."

Macbeth looked up as his tail beat a gentle tattoo on the hearthrug.

"No thank you, Mary. I'm used to being alone and he is more used to you... Good-bye."

She did not come into the hall to see them off, and when they stepped out into Trader's Street they were both rather subdued.

"You got too excited, Dickie. She's so nice really that we mustn't upset her."

"Maybe I did, but it's an utterly fantastic clue! Unless the old chap was bonkers it must mean something. He said it was 'rare' and he said it was 'hidden' and I can't understand why she's so peculiar about it all."

"I think I can. She was pleased to get the message and now she's scared to do any more about it because she might be disappointed with what she finds. I like her. She's brave and she's been very lonely. What are we going to do now, Dickie? Looks as if it might snow... But see who's here!"

While she was speaking, James Wilson's car came out of the Dolphin's yard into the street. Judith waved, spoke to her husband and the car stopped beside them.

"Hello twins. Where are you going?"

"Nowhere special," Dickie said. "We've been to see Mrs. Flowerdew and I've got news for you, James."

"Jump in the back then and we'll take you out to tea when we've had a run round. We're so sleepy after a Dolphin lunch that we thought we ought to have some air and exercise. Come and help me show Judith round some of the places we know... Yes, of course, Mary. Bring the dog too."

They had a wonderful afternoon. First James took them to the Isle of Oxney - an island once when the sea covered the Marsh - and they showed Judith the old house called Amorys where they had helped to find a Mithraic temple built by the invading Romans centuries ago (*Treasure at Amorys*). Next they drove on to a village called Dore Street where they had once become involved with smuggling. Here they left the car and walked for a mile along the banks of the Military Canal built between Rye and Hythe as a defence against Napoleon. From there James drove towards the sea where the two great Nuclear Power stations towered above the flat wastes of shingle at Dungeness, and from there he took them to New Romney (which is really very old) and found a cafe with an open fire where they were served crumpets and honey and toast and cakes and a dish of milk and water for Macbeth.

Outside it was nearly dark and a few flakes of snow were falling as Judith smiled at her husband and said, "Don't you want Dickie's story? He hasn't actually admitted it but I don't think he can eat any more."

James nodded encouragingly as Dickie sighed contentedly and told them what had happened with only occasional interruptions from his sister. He finished his story with an honest comment.

"Before you ask us any questions we've got to tell you that Mrs. Flowerdew is rather touchy about the people who know about the message. I absolutely forgot to tell her, when she asked, that you both knew about it. She knows we told Mrs. Warrender of course, and although we are thrilled about the message, I know Mary is right when she says we mustn't fuss her. But what do you both think? The others don't know yet because they've gone off to keep shop for old Royal... What's the matter now, Mary? Got a belly-ache, I s'pose, after all those crumpets."

"No, it isn't that, you beast. I've done a terrible thing. Or not done it rather. When Mrs. Flowerdew asked us who we'd told about this, I was a coward and didn't dare say that I'd told Mr. Royal. She doesn't like him but I should have told her. I know I should."

There were tears in her eyes when Judith put her hand over hers and said, "I don't think you need worry about that too much, Mary. If she doesn't like Mr. Royal, it wouldn't have made things any easier for her if you'd told her. Why doesn't she like him?"

"Most peculiar," Dickie said with a sympathetic glance at his twin. "She seems to think there's something wrong with him because he keeps a shop. But of course he has been worrying her to allow him to see the library."

"I see," James said thoughtfully. "Let's get one thing clear before we ask you more questions. Are you absolutely sure that nobody besides the four of us here knows the actual *words* of the message? Knows that Dr. Flowerdew has hidden somewhere - and not necessarily in the house in Trader's Street - a document about Rye which he must have believed to be valuable. Are you sure about that? Nobody else - not even Mrs. Warrender or the other four?"

"Sure as we can be," the twins affirmed together, and then Mary added thoughtfully, "Of course we couldn't swear that Mrs. Flowerdew hasn't told anybody but we wouldn't think so. She's not exactly chatty."

"Why did she tell you?" Judith asked gently.

"She likes us and we like her. She's lonely and sad and we told her that we wanted to help her solve a mystery. We don't think she minded sharing a secret and, as Dickie said, she doesn't want to do any more until after Christmas. We haven't told the others yet but we shall tonight because we share most things. We expect that Jon would want his mother to know although Mrs. Flowerdew might have told her already. They're friends you see, and Mrs. Warrender has been very kind to her. What do you think about it, James? Has Dickie found you a story?"

"Perhaps," James smiled. "Judith knows about old manuscripts and documents. What's your opinion about this, love? Would a document which the old man refers to as 'Rye Royal' be Elizabethan and would it be valuable?"

"Yes, I'm sure it could. There's a craze in the United States for original manuscripts of old books and documents of historical importance. I'm sure I've heard of this Dr. Flowerdew as a historian. And Dickie, it's true that Queen Elizabeth did come once to Rye. I don't believe this visit was ever particularly well recorded, but if Dr. Flowerdew had a genuine document that describes this visit it would be worth a lot of money... That's what I think, darling, and I admit I would like to see such a manuscript. Elizabethan handwriting is fascinating and sometimes very beautiful."

"There you are then," Mary said triumphantly. "P'raps if we're very gentle and tactful we could persuade Mrs. Flowerdew to change her mind and allow us to search the house before Christmas. Dickie reminded her that her house might have secret passages and rooms used by smugglers, like the Dolphin. P'raps we really could find, or help to find what we used, when we were young, to call the 'dokkerment'. We could give it to Mrs. Flowerdew as a Christmas present. And when we've actually got it then Dickie can help James to write a wonderful Christmas story for the *Clarion*. What do you think. James?"

Wilson had always been amused by the twins and, as he told Judith the previous night when they were discussing the Lone Piners, he had a high opinion of their intelligence, courage and loyalty. James believed in following his luck and more than once he had become involved with these youngsters in pursuit of news. And eventually he had always got the story, but in the case of Mrs. Flowerdew and her "dokkerment" he had his doubts.

He smiled across the table at the two eager young faces.

"Of course Richard will help me when the time comes." he agreed.

"Meantime I'm sure we must keep this information very quiet. I don't know the widow Flowerdew, but perhaps she could be persuaded to allow you two, or all of you, to search her husband's library. Maybe Mrs. Warrender, who has been such a good friend to her, could tell her that the search for a document of historical importance would help you all very much from the educational angle. Have you thought of that one?"

"No, we haven't," Dickie said admiringly. "That's terrific. That's a super idea. If she doesn't know already of course we should have to tell Mrs. Warrender what the message says. The snag is, though, that she might not be all that interested in our education because she won't have Mrs. Flowerdew worried. You see, we're supposed to be making life easier for her and cheering her up."

"And it's a full-time job in that house," Mary added thoughtfully. "In spite of the story, James, we don't want to do anything that might upset her. Acksherly, as we used to say, she's rather an old sweetie."

"Point taken, twins, but not a word to anybody else. Judith thinks there's something in it, don't you, love?"

"I do. Doesn't make sense to think that the old man wrote a message like that if he wasn't serious about it... Excuse us asking, Mary, but you haven't told this to Mr. Royal, have you?"

"Of course not. We've only just seen the paper. He does know that Dr. Flowerdew left a message for his wife and he told me that he wants to see

the library too. He knows a lot about old things and perhaps he could help to find something for us."

"I wouldn't mention it to him, though," James said as he helped Judith on with her coat. "Let's keep it to ourselves, but I would like to meet Mr. Royal. Let's go back now and call in at the shop and see if he's there."

"And thank you very much, James and Judith, for such a smashing tea," Dickie said politely as they went out into the cold. "This has been a fantastic afternoon."

So they drove back across the Marsh. The headlights slashed into the dark and showed snowflakes dancing in the beams and picked out the white fences between the road and the dykes full of sullen water. Away on their left the Dungeness lighthouse flashed and as James flicked on the windscreen wipers they saw the lights of Rye in the distance.

It was nearly six o'clock when they pulled up outside Rye Royal. The lights were still on as Dickie opened the door and stepped down into the shop. As he could not see any customers - nor, at first glance, anybody else - he winked at Mary and said very loudly in what he called his la-di-da voice:

"I say. Is there anybody thah? I want attention please. I want to buy a book. I've got one book but I want to buy anothah. I want service."

This brought David and Peter out of the office.

"Funny again!" the former said. "Trouble with you two is that people can't stop laughing at you... Hello, James and Judith. Please don't buy anything now because we're going to close up. Jon and Penny went back to the Dolphin about an hour ago for some tea and we said we'd take over. They did some business but all we had was an elderly gent who wanted comic postcards. Do you really mean that you've taken these two out for the afternoon, Judith?"

"We're gorged on crumpets," Mary said happily. "We want James and Judith to meet Mr. Royal. Has he come back?"

"No," Peter explained. "He rang up when David was trying to explain to the gent that this wasn't the sort of shop for postcards. I believe Mr. Royal thought I was Penny, but he said he had been detained and wasn't sure when he would be back - probably not until very late. He said we could close up when we liked, and he's very keen for the four of us to open the Cellar tonight but not before eight o'clock. Jon and Penny are coming down later anyway so why don't James and Judith come too? Unless you've got something more important to do, of course."

"I'd like to do that," Judith said quickly. "I'll bring James because it will be good for him to mix with the young intellectuals of Rye. Lock up now, David, and you two can squeeze in the back of the car with the twins. Come on, Jimmy."

While the others chatted, James had been wandering round the shop and looking at the books.

"Very nice," he said. "If he sells the books on these shelves he's got a very nice little business. Must be an interesting chap and I'd like to meet him."

David switched off the lights.

"Cool customer I call him. He's pleasant enough when you meet him and I'm sure he knows about books, but I must say he seemed to take it for granted that we - or Jon and Penny rather - should run his shop for him. No business of ours, though, and Peter and I don't mind helping the others, and it might be amusing for us all to come down to the Cellar this evening... Let's go. Just test the door, James, and see if I've locked it properly."

The Lone Piners met as usual for supper in their own room. When the Mortons and Peter got back to the Dolphin, Jon had lit the fire and Penny was busy getting a meal. After Peter had told the latter of Mr. Royal's telephone message and explained that he did not say where he was, the twins asked for silence and attention and told them about Mrs. Flowerdew's message and what James and Judith had said about it.

No doubt that the twins held their audience and when they had finished Jon was the first to congratulate them.

"Clever and enterprising twins," he grinned. "Well done, Richard and Mary. It doesn't seem as if there is anything we can do if she said not till after Christmas. We mustn't bother her and I don't think we need tell my mother who is now extremely busy. If Mrs. Flowerdew wants to tell her she will, but we mustn't tell anybody else of course. Are we to let Mrs. Flowerdew know that we know? What do you think, Penny?"

Penny was kneeling on the hearthrug and did not answer as impetuously as usual.

"I'm not sure. We don't know enough about her. From what the twins say she doesn't seem keen to find the document. She's not even as curious about it as we are. She doesn't seem to care. She's never told anybody that she's poor and I don't think any of us should even mention this to her again."

"Dickie suggested just now that we might persuade her to allow us to search the library," Jon said. "Seems to me that would be an attractive exercise. I wonder what Peter and David think? We asked them here for a holiday and maybe they don't want to be involved in another treasure hunt even though it's educational. What say, Peter?"

Peter was leaning against the great oak table. She had changed into a blue dress and as they all turned to her, each of her friends looked at her with admiration and affection. The firelight glinted on her beautiful golden hair as she looked down at her folded hands, thinking carefully as she always did before she spoke.

David, with a sudden lump in his throat, thought, "She's my girl. Ever since I first saw her riding her pony at Witchend it's been like this."

And Jon, with a quick glance down at Penny's copper head thought, "Penny for me and David for Peter. That's how the world goes round. May the four of us always be the same to each other."

Richard, perhaps for the first time in his life realized that this sort of elder sister of his who rode a horse and swam better even than David and knew about birds and animals and the stars, was growing up and away from him. As for Mary, she just loved Peter as she had always done. Loved her for her

kindness and generosity, for her sense of fun when it mattered and for her loyalty to and understanding of Dickie and herself.

Then Peter looked up and blushed as she realized they were all waiting for her to speak.

"I think we'd better concentrate on having a happy Christmas and I do so hope that it doesn't sound square and priggish. It's wonderful to be here with you, but Mrs. Flowerdew is unhappy and lonely and if she doesn't want to worry about a treasure then that's nothing to do with us. If she wants help she'll ask for it if she trusts us, and if we're doubtful we'd better tell Mrs. Warrender and she will find out. Let's not worry too much about her treasure. She might like us to decorate her kitchen with holly and paperchains or get her a Christmas tree. You understand what I'm trying to say, don't you, Penny?"

"Course I do. I was just wondering about Mr. James Wilson though. Is he on the story trail, Dickie?"

"Not really. He said we were to keep quiet about it. Judith thinks it might be a valuable document, but I know what Peter means. Let's see what happens, and it's most extraordinary after those crumpets but I think I could nibble a little something soon."

The twins made no fuss about the four elder ones going off to the Book Cellar just before eight o'clock. Mrs. Warrender came up once to find out what was happening, and told them that she would come over with them at half-past nine as she had not seen Mrs. Flowerdew for two days.

So they settled down to a pleasant evening on their own. They played some records, and on a radio news-flash they heard a snow warning for south-east England. Mary started a long letter to her parents without the mention of Elizabethan "dokkerments". Dickie worked for a time on "Events to Record", but soon realized that there were more events than will, at this time of the evening, to record them. So he wandered about and then went down on his hands and knees and peered through the diamond panes of the old windows where a smuggler had once scratched with a diamond, "God

Save England and ye Towne of Rye". The roofs now were powdered with snow and this seemed a very satisfactory state of affairs for Christmas.

He tried unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn and began to prowls round the room again until Mary begged him to be still.

"I know we mustn't worry Mrs. Flowerdew and all that," he said as he sat down. "I know all that, Mary, but I've got a feeling that we shan't be able to forget this business. I've just had a thought about what the old dear told us about that Bonfire night when she was burgled."

"She wasn't actually burgled was she, Dickie? Didn't she say that a Bonfire Boy disguised as a Red Indian got in through the kitchen window and tried to break into the library but couldn't do it?"

"That's what she said, but what I'm wondering is why a chap like that should want to break in there? Why, Mary? Why choose that dismal place, right next door to the Dolphin? All this happened at the beginning of November, so don't you see that even then there must have been somebody who thought that there might be something valuable in that house and probably in the library. See what I mean?"

Mary put down her pen.

"Yes, I do. Clever twin. Nobody else has thought of that, have they? What shall we do about it?"

Before Dickie could answer Mrs. Warrender came in.

"Half past nine," she smiled. "Will you escort me next door, please? I want to see how Mrs. Flowerdew is getting on... Hello, Mackie. Sorry I forgot to greet you. I'm glad you brought him, Mary. I hope he likes Rye."

Mary beamed at her.

"He likes it very much, Mrs. Warrender, and you too because you like him. We're ready now."

The sky was clear and bright when they went out into Trader's Street although about two inches of snow had fallen.

Mrs. Flowerdew's front door was locked as it always was after sundown, but Mrs. Warrender had a key. The light was on in the hall and as they stepped in and looked for the mat on which to wipe their shoes, they noticed that it had been pushed to one side.

"She'll be in the kitchen," Mary said. "We'll come with you and say 'Good night' before we go up."

She ran ahead down the hall, calling, "Here we are, Mrs. Flowerdew. It's us and we've brought Mrs. Warrender to see you."

There was no answer although the kitchen door was ajar and the light on. She pushed the door open but there was nobody there. Suddenly Mary was afraid.

"She's not here. Look in the scullery, Dickie. Call her, Mrs. Warrender. P'raps she's upstairs doing something in our rooms?"

"Don't be silly, Mary," Mrs. Warrender said calmly.

"Of course she's here."

But she was not. She was not in the scullery nor was she in the cold, ugly dining-room which was never used. They stood at the bottom of the stairs and called her name but there was no reply.

"Stay here, children," Mrs. Warrender said firmly. "I'm going upstairs. Perhaps she's gone to bed early and fallen asleep. We mustn't frighten her."

The twins stood side by side in the hall. "Something has happened. Something awful," Mary whispered. "I'm sure of it. I knew when I opened the kitchen door."

Dickie nodded as she grasped his hand. They could hear Mrs. Warrender opening and closing doors upstairs. They heard her calling Mrs. Flowerdew's name and they heard the thudding of their own hearts.

"Let's go up with her to our rooms," Dickie whispered as he turned towards the foot of the stairs. As he did so he glanced for the first time at the great library door which was always locked. But it was not locked now. It was ajar although no light showed in the room.

"Come quickly, Mrs. Warrender!" he shouted. "The library door is open... Are you there, Mrs. Flowerdew? Can you hear us?"

They heard Mrs. Warrender's running footsteps on the landing and down the stairs behind them. They heard her whisper, "Stay there, twins." They watched her step forward bravely, push back the library door and switch on the lights. They saw her step over the threshold and stand quite still. Then she turned and came back to them.

"Come back to the Dolphin, children," she said. "You must sleep there tonight. There's nobody in this house. Mrs. Flowerdew has gone."

9. The Widow Disturbed

About half-past eight on the evening when Roy Royal went to Holford Court, Mrs. Flowerdew was sitting alone in the kitchen.

For her, to sit alone was no novelty. For most of her life, even when her husband was alive, she had been lonely, but now that these engaging young people had touched her life she was no longer taking solitude for granted.

As she sat by the fire, her thoughts were more coherent than of late. In an odd way, her husband was nearer to her than he had been for many years. She was remembering that the past had always been more important to him than the present. Indeed, the vanished men and women of history were of more interest to him than anybody of his own generation.

She sat with her hands in her lap, gazing into the flames. The old clock on the mantelpiece chugged away the seconds as it had done for years. There was no other sound. She thought again of her husband's last days. She remembered his stubborn refusal to go to hospital, and although he had been ill she realized that he had never been anything but mentally alert. The library had become the centre of his life and although he never talked to her about what he was doing she knew that he was writing a book because she had seen pages of manuscript on his desk. And she knew that the two interests of his scholarly life were the age of Elizabeth I and the history of the Cinque Ports and Rye in particular.

Memories from the past crowded into her mind as the clock ticked the seconds away, and then suddenly these thoughts and emotions were banished by the remembrance of the Morton twins and of the way they had come in here to cheer her up with their chatter and talk of helping to solve a mystery. Perhaps she had been wrong to show them her husband's message, but they were both as sharp as needles and the girl in particular was thoughtful and affectionate. When she had told them both, a few hours ago, that she did not really know what to say to them, she told the truth. But why had she told them that she did not want to do anything more before Christmas about finding something her husband wanted her to know about?

Suppose that somewhere in this house and probably in the library, there was hidden a document or parchment of value? Why should she not try to find it now? It was true that Charles, during his last few days, had told her that he did not want her to sell the house or anything in it, and the lawyers had clearly told her that everything he had was to be hers. That did show, she thought, that she had meant something to him and it was proved by the scrawl on the page at the back of the book.

Suddenly she reached a decision. The twins would be here soon and perhaps, before they went to bed, she would tell them that she had changed her mind and that it might be worth trying to find what her husband meant her to have. And if they wanted to help her, why should they not? The other two couples had plenty to think about without engaging in a treasure hunt, but if there was anything of value to be found, what a Christmas she would give them all!

She put a few lumps of coal on the fire, took the key to the library from her handbag and went out into the hall feeling almost lighthearted. It was actually making a decision that helped her, and in her new mood she forgot to switch off the light in the kitchen and turned on the light in the hall at least half an hour before it was necessary to do so. Then she unlocked the library door and left it ajar so that she would hear the twins when they arrived. The big room was very cold, so recklessly she switched on all three bars of the electric fire which stood on the stone hearth.

With the warmth of the fire on her back she began to dream of how she would spend it. Why not a Christmas tree with spangles and candles and loaded with gifts for these nice children? And if there was enough money she could buy something magnificent and expensive for Mrs. Warrender who was so kind to her. She would consult Penelope and Jonathan about this. Penny, as they called her - and, come to think of it, the girl's hair was the colour of a new penny - would know what she would like. And then there was the woman in the greengrocer's shop in Landgate Street whose hands were always red with chilblains. She had always been kind to her so perhaps a pair of warm gloves would be welcome. And if all the big Christmas trees had not been sold they could get one. She ought to buy some holly and paper chains as well. Then cards to give the children, and

something special to eat and drink, and because it was Christmas she must give something away to somebody who needed it more than she did!

And with these exciting and comforting thoughts the old lady, now with Christmas in her heart, tried to be practical. Why had Charles made it so clear that while he was ill the library door must be kept locked and that strangers would not be allowed to go in? The reason must be that somewhere in this room was hidden something which nobody else must see. That was why she had been upset by that ridiculously-named Mr. Royal. He might be harmless, but he had become a nuisance by badgering her to allow him to examine all these books. He kept on trying to persuade her to let him in here. True, he had given her some cash for a few books at a time when she was short of housekeeping money, but he had become a fussy nuisance because she would not let him see this room. And, of course, she was not to sell anything yet. But there would be no harm in *looking* now. Everything here belonged to her.

She began to search the desk. Only one of the drawers in it was locked and Mrs. Flowerdew, who had her husband's keys, had no difficulty in opening it. This drawer contained several bundles of manuscript paper covered with her husband's handwriting. It looked like a historical treatise and was probably the book which, he once told her, was to be his life's work. Perhaps it might be of some value if it was finished, but it certainly was not a clue to a hidden treasure of which nobody else knew anything.

"Hidden." She remembered as she locked the drawer again, was the important word. And if the unfinished message meant anything it certainly did not indicate that something so important was in this desk.

She stooped to warm her cold fingers and when they were supple again she took the written message from her handbag. She knew the words by heart and no inspiration came as she read them again:

To my dear wife
I know now that
I should have told you.
Forgive me but I have
told nobody. The rare Rye
Royal manuscript is
hidden in there.

The reference to it being "hidden" in some place, instead of the use of a word like "secret", was surely significant? She looked round in dismay at the walls every inch of which was covered with books from floor to ceiling. Of course it was possible that something like a paper or a parchment was hidden behind them or even between the pages of any one of these thousands of volumes. Perhaps the children would help her to move every book so that the walls behind each shelf could be examined? And every book must be opened and shaken. The ladder which Charles used to reach the topmost shelves was waiting to be climbed, but surely examination of all these books would take days? She wanted, more than anything else, to

find her husband's treasure tomorrow so that she could do her shopping well before Christmas Day. Perhaps she could ask them all to help her tomorrow, as soon as breakfast was over? No doubt Jonathan and David would find some systematic way of searching and she would ask them tonight when they came in.

Having made up her mind to take action, she was hardly surprised when there came a knock on the front door. The twins and their little dog of course and she hoped Mrs. Warrender had found time to come over with them because it was two days since she had seen her kind friend.

So, feeling happier than for months, she went out into the hall leaving the library door ajar and thinking, as she did so, how excited the twins would be when she told them that she had changed her mind. But it was not Richard and Mary who were waiting on her doorstep. As she pulled back the door, a small woman wearing a fur coat and a silk scarf over her head stepped forward so firmly that Mrs. Flowerdew would have been unable to close the door even if she had wanted to do so. Indeed, she only had time to realize that behind the stranger was a big man wearing a camel coat, a tweed cap and heavy horn-rimmed spectacles and that against the kerb was a parked car.

"I'm sure it must be Mrs. Flowerdew," the woman said as she pressed forward. "Do please forgive our late call but it is most important for you to spare us a few minutes... This is my brother, Mrs. Flowerdew, and I'm sure you will be interested to hear what he has to say to you... Yes, I know this is an unconventional call but we have so little time, and there is no need to keep you long."

Mrs. Flowerdew gasped with surprise and anger. She had never seen these people before and standing firmly on her own doormat in her own hall she tried to repel them.

"I assure you that you have made a mistake, madam. I do not know you and have nothing to say to you. It is late and I am alone in the house. Will you kindly leave at once?"

But they did not go. Before she realized it they were both in the hall and the man had closed the front door. He took off his cap and towered over her as he spoke loudly with a strong American accent. She tried to interrupt but had no chance for when he paused for breath - and this was a relief because he smelled strongly of cigar smoke - the woman took up the tale.

Step by step, still apologizing and saying that they would not keep her long, they forced her up the hall. The man was particularly aggressive.

"I know, I know, Mrs. Flowerdoo. I reckon this is an inconvenient time for a call, but I'm an American citizen and my sister here who lives in your fine little country has only just told me - not ten minutes ago Mrs. Flowerdoo did she tell me - that your late husband's famous library is for sale... I'm a collector, Mrs. Flowerdoo and I'm a business man and I'm on my way to Dover right now on my way to Paree----"

"He *never* flies, Mrs. Flowerdew. Isn't that strange? He can go anywhere in the world but he will never leave the ground. He's a busy man and when a friend told us that you lived in this cute little street in Rye and it was on our way to Dover----

Mrs. Flowerdew raised her voice.

"But you've made a mistake. My husband's library is *not* for sale. You have entered my house uninvited and I demand that you leave at once... Please go."

While she was speaking the woman edged past her, pushed back the door of the library and walked into the room. The man followed and stood for a moment on the threshold, and Mrs. Flowerdew saw a look of triumph on his face as he glanced round the shelves of books.

Then he stood aside and held open the door for her.

"There now, Mrs. Flowerdoo. You wouldn't grudge us a look at this splendid room, would you? Those of us who admire and love - yes, love is the word, Mrs. Flowerdoo - those of us who love what is old and rare in this

lil' ole cute country of yours, are proud to have travelled thousands of miles to see such treasures as this."

He took her arm firmly and led her over to the chair in which she had been sitting only a few minutes ago.

"Sit down there, Mrs. Flowerdoo, and take your ease. I have a proposition for you. I am a business man and I'm in a hurry."

The old lady shook her head bravely.

"You have made a mistake. I cannot listen to any proposition and I ask you both to leave at once. I am expecting friends at any minute from the hotel next door."

For a moment the man made no answer as he took off his spectacles and looked meaningfully over her shoulder. She turned quickly and then realized that the woman was standing directly behind her chair.

"I'm sure your friends would advise you to listen to my brother's proposition, Mrs. Flowerdew. What he has to say is really important to you."

This was a surprising statement under the circumstances, and for the first time since she had opened her front door Mrs. Flowerdew was scared rather than angry. This room was better lit than the hall and she was now able to see her unwanted visitors plainly. The face of the woman looking down at her was unusually smooth and expressionless and her eyes cold and blue - eyes which would never give away the owner's thoughts or feelings.

The man was speaking again.

"Listen carefully, Mrs. Flowerdoo. Name your price for this house and everything in it. There is nothing else I want to see and though this offer is not what we, in our country, would call good business but real sentimental, I've made up my mind that I want a house in Rye. And I want this house. Name your price."

She shook her head dumbly and did not see the woman behind her take a small syringe from her handbag. She hardly felt the prick in her neck and did not even realize that her will-power had deserted her although she remained conscious. She did not feel the hands of the two strangers on her arms as they raised her from the chair.

She felt nothing as they led her into the hall and the woman helped her into her own coat and pressed her fingers round her handbag. She was aware that the man opened the front door. She saw him glance up and down Trader's Street and then step across the pavement and open the rear door of the waiting car.

She did not hear her own front door close behind her and neither did she feel the snowflakes falling on her upturned face as she was firmly pushed into the back seat.

10. The Pencil Dot Clue

That same evening at about half-past nine, James and Judith Wilson, as promised, visited Mr. Royal's Book Cellar. They had been for a walk before they found the steps leading down to the side entrance, and when they opened the door their first impression was that the place was packed with young people all of whom were talking or arguing at the top of their voices.

The candles were flickering on the tables and adding, in their small way, to the stuffiness induced by the heaters on the walls. There was a pleasant smell of coffee and although there was certainly a disc on the record-player nobody could hear it, and only those close enough to him could hear that a handsome, bearded boy was singing "Silent Night" to the traditional tune and was quite impervious to the din around him.

They pushed their way through the cheerful crowd and crammed themselves into the corner. Jon, who was behind the counter with Penny, waved and then said something to Peter who was acting as waitress and who had not yet seen them.

As soon as they were seated she came over to them.

"Good evening, sir and madam," she smiled. "Do you like your coffee black, white or with cream? I must warn you that cream is sixpence extra."

"We'll be devils and spend up to the limit," James said. "Bring a cup for yourself and sit down here with us, Peter... Or better still, sit down next to Judith and I'll fetch the coffee."

She smiled her thanks as James got up. He had the sense not to say that she looked tired and joined in the applause as the bearded youth stood on his chair and bowed at the conclusion of his solo,

"Nice of you to come, James," Penny smiled as she took his order, "What do you think of our Book Cellar? It is rather fun and not usually so noisy..."

Three with cream? That's fine - all extra for us, Mr. Royal said we can share the proceeds tonight, didn't he, Jon?"

Jon, with his hair more on end than usual, looked up from the sink in which he was washing cups.

"That's what he said this morning but he hasn't turned up yet. He telephoned just before six to say he might be very late, I know that Royal is one of Penelope's extra boy friends but I think all this is a bit too much... Look at me now! Chained to the sink for the evening. I think that Mr. Royal has a first class nerve. As Dickie would say, 'I'm sick of being a scullion!'."

"Hasn't he telephoned to see whether you've opened? No? Very odd. I'm curious about your boy friend, Penny, and I wanted to meet him. We'll drink your coffee and add to your profits for as long as we can stick this row and atmosphere and if he doesn't turn up I'll come down and see him in the morning... Is that David over there with those two girls?"

Jon nodded gloomily.

"Yes, that's David. He's no longer trying to escape and I'm not going to help him. Those young females will still be arguing at closing time... Keep Peter with you, James. I don't think she likes this place much."

James went back with the tray and leaned against the wall while Judith and Peter continued a conversation which he did not interrupt. He noticed the latter look across at David and his vivacious companions and then whisper to Judith. When they had finished their coffee he was not altogether surprised when his wife said:

"Peter has got a headache and so have I, Jimmy. We're going to get some fresh air. Shan't be long. You stay here."

This hint was as good as a command so he sat down in Judith's chair and watched Peter go over to the counter and fetch her coat. She did not look at David who was still heavily engaged.

Outside the snow was falling softly again as the two girls climbed the steps and went out into Landgate Street. For a few moments they walked in silence and not until they had passed under the great Land Gate did Peter say:

"It was nice of you to suggest coming out, Judith. Sure you don't mind my calling you Judith? I suppose it sounds square but I haven't known you very long. You won't laugh if I confess that I'm a bit shy, will you?"

Judith took her arm.

"Don't be silly, Peter. I really have got a headache and although we hardly know each other, I'm not so very much older than you and I thought it might be a good idea to have a gossip. What's wrong? Nothing to do with your nice David, is it? Can I help?"

"You *are* nice, Judith. I don't suppose you can possibly understand, but down there in all that noise and smoke I suddenly felt sort of homesick. I'm not really a 'with it' girl, Judith, and I really am shy of strangers. I've never been to a place like the Cellar before and I felt I couldn't breathe down there. I live in a house belonging to David's parents right in the hills. At night, at Witchend - that's what the house is called - when my window is open the air is fresh and clean and there isn't a sound except a silly old owl I seem to have known all my life. There's just my father, you see. Only the two of us and he's alone all day and now I've left him for Christmas and I feel awful about it."

"But didn't he want you to come here?"

"Yes, he did. There isn't anybody in the world more unselfish. He's going to Hereford to my uncle at Christmas, but I still feel awful and he'd be angry with me if he knew what I'm saying to you."

"Then don't say it again. What else is wrong? You're happy with your friends aren't you, or have you had a silly row with David?"

Peter shook her head.

"No, no! He's wonderful and so are his parents and so is Mrs. Warrender and so, of course, are Jon and Penny. I know I'm a fool and not being my age, but everything is so different here and I don't feel I'm fitting in. I ought to be enjoying this evening but I'm not. I didn't know what to say to those girls David was arguing with... I'm not jealous of them, Judith. Honestly I'm not, but I suppose I can't understand why he doesn't hate that cellar as much as I do. Am I being a fool? I feel better already out here."

Judith did not have much difficulty in comforting her. She told her how she had changed many of her ideas and her way of life when she first fell in love with James. And very gently she pointed out that life for Peter could never be an extension of the little house in the Shropshire hills.

"If you really want David, and I'm sure you do, you'll have to be ready to go anywhere with him. Even to London. Even to Rye. And if I'm not mistaken, here he is coming to look for you."

While talking, they had been standing on the pavement overlooking the Salts where the great bonfire had burned a boat on Rye Fawkes night. As Peter looked down the street to the Land Gate she saw David in his old duffle coat hurrying towards them.

"Hi there!" he shouted. "Wait for me you two. I'm coming up for air."

"There you are," Judith whispered. "I'm a witch. I cast a spell over you both... No, Peter, you silly girl. Let him come to you. I'm going back to my husband now."

So Peter waited with a thumping heart and happiness welling up inside her that brought tears to her eyes. Even before he spoke she was sure that he had missed her and now all would be well.

And so it was. She leaned against the low wall and wondered what he would say. But he did not say anything until he had kissed her. Then:

"You might have waited for me, Pete. I can't stand that cellar and I couldn't escape from those earnest girls. One of them is at Sussex and knows Jon and the other is reading history somewhere, and they hemmed me in. I saw

you go out with Judith but I couldn't escape until I'd bought them each another coffee. It was worth it and I bet they're still so pleased with themselves and their academic arguments that they haven't noticed I'm not there."

"I bet they have, David," Peter said fervently as she felt for his hand. "My head is better now. Judith had a headache too. I suppose we'd better go back."

"What about a walk? Too cold to stand still."

"But what about the others slaving away down there? Is it fair to leave them on their own?"

"Not really, but they won't mind. It's their show and they'll manage without us. If Judith is as nice as I'm sure she is, she'll tell them about our headaches and we'll go back presently. Guess what? I want you on my own. Makes a nice change."

"Yes, David," she agreed meekly as she fell into step beside him. "It does make a change and I like it."

They walked up and down the cobbled streets without noticing or caring about the time. They talked of Witchend and of their other Lone Pine friends Tom and Jenny still in Shropshire. Then David said, "I won't always have to work in London, Peter. You know that, don't you? When I'm through my articles I'll be able to go anywhere as a junior partner. Maybe Ludlow or Shrewsbury or Bishop's Castle. I don't think I'd ask you to go anywhere which wasn't within sight of your hills. They're my hills as well. It seems as if we've always shared them. Because I don't say much don't think I don't know how much they mean to you."

They were in the High Street when David said this. As always he spoke quietly and as she listened Peter suddenly saw herself more clearly than ever before. She pulled him into the porch of a shop and gripped his arms.

"David, you're wonderful. You're too good for me and I'm selfish and I've behaved very badly tonight. We should go back to the Cellar now, but

before we go I want to say this to you. I do love the Shropshire hills but what you said just now made me see that our world is bigger than the county where we met each other. We can't hide ourselves up there for ever and it's about time I grew up and realized it. I was sulking down there with the others just because I wasn't used to that sort of people, and I'm going back to apologize to Penny and Jon. And I want you to know that I will go anywhere in the world with you and be thankful that you asked me... Now do you understand and do you forgive me for being so selfish?"

He would have forgiven her anything at that moment, but before he could find the words there was a crash and a muttered curse a few yards away from them as a man fell from his bicycle which had skidded in the snow. As David turned he saw in the light of a street lamp that the unfortunate cyclist was Fred Vasson, the porter from the Dolphin.

They ran across the road to help him up and he was certainly pleased to see them. "The four of you are wanted back at the Dolphin right away," he explained as he rubbed a bruised knee. "There's real trouble because the boss can't get any answer on the phone at Royal's place. Snow I reckon or else nobody can hear it ringing. She wants you all back at once and no argument. She says just to tell Mr. Royal you can't stay any longer. Where are our two anyway? Still there?"

David lifted up the cycle which looked the worse for wear.

"As far as we know they're still there. We left them about half an hour ago and were on our way back. What's wrong? Are the twins O.K.?"

Fred nodded and seemed to have recovered his good humour.

"They're O.K. as usual. Old Mrs. Flowerdew has disappeared. Madam has searched the house but says there's no sign of her. Lights were on in the hall, in her kitchen and in the old boy's library, but she's not there and Mrs. Warrender wants you all back at once. She's in a state and maybe one of you could come back with me now and the other get down the Cellar and bring our two back. Better not tell anybody else why they're wanted."

"Of course," Peter said. "I'll come back with you now. What does Mrs. Warrender think has happened?"

Vasson nodded his thanks and took his cycle from David.

"She doesn't say but she's right fussed about the old lady. Too fussed I reckon. Both those Flowerdews were odd and maybe she's just gone out for a walk."

David did not agree but his opinion would not help Fred.

"Tell Mrs. Warrender we'll be up as soon as we can," he said to Peter. "And you might keep an eye on the twins."

James and Judith were still in the Cellar and looked up in surprise when David, very breathless, arrived alone. He stopped at their table and whispered:

"Peter is O.K. Trouble at the Dolphin and Mrs. Flowerdew has disappeared. Mrs. Warrender wants us to get back right away. Don't go yet please, but we'll have to get rid of the others without them knowing that there's anything wrong... I'll tell Jon."

The bearded carol-singer was still there but the two argumentative girls had gone, and when Jon announced that they had to close, the remaining customers went with little trouble and some banter about, "Bed-time for the little ones."

As soon as they were alone and Jon was locking up the till David told them in more detail what Vasson had said. Penny was very upset, particularly when she realized the telephone extension behind the bar was not switched through.

"I'm devoted to Fred," she stormed as she struggled into her coat, "but I've never heard him say such a fool thing before. Of course the old dear hasn't gone off for a walk in the snow and I'm sure something awful has happened to her... And don't goggle at me like that, Jon. Don't bother now about how much money we've taken tonight but just lock up and get back to the

Dolphin. And don't leave the keys in the lock. Is your car here, James? No, it wouldn't be, would it! *Do hurry, Jon!*"

Jon did not say much but carefully locked up and pocketed the keys. Penny did not wait for the others but ran ahead and was on the doorstep of thirty-nine with her aunt, Peter and the twins when they arrived. Jon went directly to his mother.

"Sorry to be so dramatic about this, Jon, but I'm worried and I think we should tell the police. I have been through the house but perhaps we had better search it once more. And it's not really fair to involve Mr. and Mrs. Wilson in all this, is it?"

James explained that they would like to help and after some discussion Judith and Peter took the twins into the library, while the others once again searched the house without success. Back in the hall Penny noticed that Mrs. Flowerdew's coat and headscarf were not on their usual peg behind the door and there was no sign of her handbag.

So although it seemed as if she might just have gone out for a walk it was possible, as James pointed out, that somebody had called for her. Mrs. Warrender, backed by Penny, maintained that she never went farther than the shops and that, as the twins were due to come in to bed between nine and half-past, it was most unlikely that she would leave the house.

"No, Mr. Wilson. I'm not satisfied that she went out for a stroll in this sort of weather and it's true that she hasn't got any real friends in the town. She might have been coming in to see me at the Dolphin but she could hardly lose herself coming next door! No. I'm going to telephone the police, and as I suppose nobody will think of going to bed until a constable has been, you had all better wait in the kitchen."

The Police Station was not far away and a pleasant young man soon arrived. He was obviously surprised at the fuss as it was not yet eleven o'clock. Like most people in Rye he knew that Mrs. Flowerdew was eccentric and obviously believed that tonight she was odder than usual.

"I wouldn't worry unduly, madam. Elderly ladies do queer things at times, and if you've searched the house twice there's no need for me to go round again. She'll be back soon I'll be bound, but if you'll give me a description of what she was wearing we'll circulate it just in case there's been an accident. I take it you've no reason to suspect such a thing? And there's no telephone here so she couldn't have been called away... Not to worry, madam. We'll keep our eyes open and when she comes back you might let us know... Now if you'll describe her coat..."

Five minutes later Mrs. Warrender joined the others in the kitchen. They could see that she was still worried but after some argument she persuaded the twins that there was nothing more they could do and that they must come back with her to the Dolphin and sleep in Jon and Penny's rooms respectively.

"You others may think it worthwhile to sit up here in turns in case Mrs. Flowerdew comes back, but if she does Jon or Penny must promise to come in and tell me. I've got a telephone by my bed in case the police ring. Be sure to keep the hall light on and the front door on the latch. Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, to whom I am very grateful, must do as they please. Come along, twins."

To everyone's surprise, Richard and Mary, after exchanging an understanding look, went with her without argument. Jon went too and said over his shoulder, "Please don't go until I come back, James. Shan't be long."

He was back in ten minutes.

"My mother is taking this badly," he said. "I'm worried too and I've got some ideas I'd like to talk over. Do you mind being involved, James, and does Judith mind if you are?"

Judith shook her head, but not very convincingly, as her husband said, "Carry on then, Jon. I don't suppose any of you would sleep if you went to bed, and it wouldn't be a bad idea if one of you girls would make some tea. What have you got on your mind?"

Jon took off his spectacles and polished them as he prowled up and down the room.

"My mother finds it hard to believe that Mrs. Flowerdew left her own house of her own free will without leaving a message. She wonders if she's lost her memory and is wandering about somewhere, but Penny, who knows the old lady better than I do, thinks she is much more cheerful and balanced than she was before you lot turned up. The twins told me that she was really friendly this afternoon. But I've another worry. She's not the only person who has disappeared today without leaving a proper message."

"But Mr. Royal did telephone just before six when we were in the shop," Peter said as she put a tray on the table. "I don't really know him but he seemed in a hurry and just said he didn't know when he would be back... It's true he was dead keen for us to open the Cellar at eight o'clock - not before eight, he said."

"I know," Jon agreed. "But you said he was in a hurry, and he never said where he was or when he would be back. It's all very well, but in spite of Penny's opinion of Royal I think he's another oddity, and if he wasn't coming back this evening I'd like to know why he was so keen for us to open up the Cellar. I'd also like to know whether he's come home yet and in a second I'll go in next door and telephone."

James was now very interested.

"Are you trying to suggest that there may be a connection between the two disappearances, Jon?"

"I'm not sure, but it worries me. It's a coincidence and we know that Royal was interested in this house - and the library in particular. There's something going on here that I don't understand. Let's try and argue it all out."

They made him sit down and while they drank their tea James gathered together the facts and their opinions, although David and Peter had not much to say. It was agreed that Royal had tried more than once to get into this house, and that on Rye Fawkes night an attempt was made to force the library door when everybody else in the town was looking the other way.

Then Penny remembered that Jon's friend Henry, who had come over to the Cellar that night with some Hastings friends, had seen one of the Bonfire Boys disguised as a Red Indian trying the outside door of the Cellar. Then Peter recalled that the twins had said something about the discovery by Mrs. Flowerdew of a feather from an Indian head-dress found in this house on the same night.

"Very interesting," James commented. "So that's link number one between Royal's shop and this house with its valuable library. Now we all know that Mrs. Flowerdew has a message from her late husband that suggests there is something of value hidden here - probably in the library because he told her to keep it locked and not allow anybody to see it. O.K.? Good. Now Jon, nobody, not even your mother, really believes that Mrs. Flowerdew left here of her own free will, do they?"

"Wrong," Penny interrupted. "That policeman does."

"So he does. Sorry. What about David and Peter? Neither of you are saying much."

"How can we?" David replied. "We don't really know Mrs. Flowerdew. We like her of course. I'm not very taken with Royal. Not my type and I agree with Jon that his behaviour today has been very peculiar. What about you, Peter?"

"I'm unhappy about it all. I hate this sort of thing but I've known Penny long enough to like Mrs. Flowerdew for her sake, even if I didn't like her already. I can't believe that she'd ever do anything underhand or mean and I'm very sorry for her. I don't really know Mr. Royal but I don't think he's my type either. Too smooth."

"Very well then," James summed up. "I'm with Jon now and believe there's a chance that Royal may have something to do with Mrs. Flowerdew's disappearance. There doesn't seem to be anything we can do at present to find the old lady but Royal must be found. Run into the Dolphin and telephone, Jon. He might be back and I don't see why some of us shouldn't pay him a call."

Jon was back in five minutes.

"No reply. I'm sure the bell rings simultaneously in the shop and the flat above. The Cellar extension has to be plugged in and we forgot to do that tonight. But I've had a brainwave. Just before Royal went off this afternoon he was looking up something in a telephone directory on his desk. Do you remember, Penny... He was checking down the page with that silver pencil of his after you'd brought him a cup of coffee. You asked him something about an unpriced book and he came over to explain to you. I was close to his office and I think he said 'Wait a minute'. Remember, Penny?"

"Yes, I do. He was a bit annoyed. He certainly had a pencil and I believe he had a telephone directory. Do you think he was checking the number of the place he was going to, James?"

"He might. Or the address. I'd like to have a chat with your Mr. Royal. I wonder if he knows that the woman he's so anxious to cultivate has vanished. Maybe he would be interested to know? Suppose we go down Landgate Street and see if he's returned? In his absence, you're responsible for his shop, and if he's not there soon, perhaps we should do something about it. Somebody must stay here in case the old lady turns up. Judith and you two girls if you don't mind. David and Jon with me."

Peter did not think much of this idea, but Judith reminded her that they would be more use here if Mrs. Flowerdew did return or if Mrs. Warrender wanted help, so the other three went off together.

There was nobody in Landgate Street and no lights in the windows of the flat above as they stood on the step of Rye Royal.

"Unlock the door, Jon," James said. "We must make sure that he hasn't come back. It's just possible that he's in bed. You've a right to do this if a curious constable comes along."

Jon did as he was told and David switched on the light in Royal's office. They knocked and called the bookseller's name through the locked door at the foot of the stairs to his flat. There was no response.

"What now, James?" David said. "Do we call this a night or do we leave a message to ask Royal to telephone the Dolphin when he does turn up?"

Jon would not have this.

"I'm not going to give in now. I want to know where he went this afternoon, and as his absence now might be reckoned an emergency I don't see why we shouldn't telephone where he went and ask when he left. He put me in charge, and as James has reminded us I've a right to know."

"Yes, but where is he?"

"Remember what Penny said about the telephone directory. Let's look in his office. I've thought of something else."

There was not much room for three of them in the little cubby-hole. David was still rather bored but he realized that James was mildly excited as Jon put down on the desk the telephone directory which was at the top of the pile on a shelf.

"This is the one he must have been using," Jon said. "It's Brighton and seems to cover a large area. I remember now that when he was looking for a number and Penny interrupted him he was stirring a cup of coffee with that silver pencil. Penny never gives anybody a spoon, and I believe he put the pencil in the directory to keep the place. You'd do that wouldn't you, James?"

"I suppose I would. You're quite the young detective tonight, Jon. Are you suggesting that the page he was checking through might show coffee stains?"

And that was how they found the name, address and number of Baxter, Mrs. Peregrine, Holford Court, Hurst-combe marked with a pencil dot and some brown stains on the same page.

"Very, very intelligent," David conceded. "I'm beginning to wake up. Why don't you ring that number, Jon, and ask when Royal left? He might have had an accident and it does seem to be the sort of place to which he'd go to

buy books, doesn't it? Have a go. They won't be so pleased if they've all gone to bed but you've a right to know what's happened to him."

Jon nodded and dialled the number. The other two stood by him in silence and James raised his eyebrows when the ringing tone was soon answered. They heard a man's voice and then Jon politely stated his business and why he was anxious to trace Mr. Royal. Although they could not hear the actual words, they saw Jon's look of surprise and annoyance as the man at the other end rapped out a few brief sentences and then replaced his receiver.

"Very odd," Jon said quietly. "And rather sinister, I think. Nasty chap with some sort of a foreign accent. Said that he knows nothing about Mr. Royal who hasn't been there, doesn't know what I was talking about and that I've obviously got the wrong number. He was rude - and rather crude. Not a chap I care for. And I don't believe him. Royal is a methodical sort and he wouldn't mark a number in the directory if it didn't mean something to him. That's why he *did* mark it. What shall we do, James? Tell the police and then go to bed?"

James scratched his chin but there was a gleam of interest in his eyes as he looked at the two boys.

"Hurstcombe can't be much more than thirty miles from here, can it?"

David laughed. "O.K. Let's go. That's what you mean, isn't it? I was getting bored but I can't see any reason why we shouldn't go and look at Holford Court and the magnificently named Mrs. Baxter. The girls won't be pleased with this suggestion so you'll have to do your stuff, James. And with Mrs. Warrender too."

David was right. There was no news of Mrs. Flowerdew at thirty-nine, Mrs. Warrender had not been back and the three girls were very annoyed and thought their idea was crazy. James pointed out that it was no longer snowing, that he would take full responsibility and take great care in the car. After some more argument, Judith agreed to do her best to explain to Mrs. Warrender why they had gone - and that was that.

Jon did the map reading in the car on the last few miles of the journey. Some of the roads were rather tricky with snow but James was a splendid driver and took no risks as they travelled with the smooth line of the Downs between them and the sea. The church clock of Hurstcombe was striking midnight as they drove down the empty village street, and with Jon's help they soon found the iron entrance gates of Holford Court.

"I don't think we'll drive up to the house," James said as he got out of the car and stretched. "I can see some light on the ground floor so somebody is still awake. Are you two sure you want to come because no doubt we're trespassing, but I'm going to look round?... O.K. I thought you would but I had to ask."

"Just an idea," David said, "but why don't we turn the car and back in on the grass inside just off the drive. Just as well to be off the road and we might want to make a quick getaway. See what I mean?"

James agreed and then switched off the lights and pocketed the flashlight he always carried in the car.

"No need to talk," he said. "Keep your eyes and ears open and walk on the grass behind me. I don't want to use my torch if I can help it and the drive is a bit rough."

The boys followed him in silence. The bulk of the house loomed up in front of them and after about two hundred yards the drive swung sharply to the left towards a terrace and a porch. They could still see a vertical line of light which suggested that the curtains of a room facing the terrace had not been drawn together.

The moon was hidden by clouds now and snow began to fall again as James whispered, "There's a sort of courtyard on the right here. Probably the old stables. I'd like to see whether there are any cars there so keep your eyes open when we're through that archway and I'll use the torch."

It was very dark in the yard but as soon as the light was flicked on they saw two cars - one an elderly black saloon and the other a blue Mini Traveller.

"Again!" Jon whispered. "Let me look at the Mini again. I swear it's Royal's... Yes, it is. It's blue and I remember the number. So he *is* here and that man on the phone was a liar. I'm going to the front door and ask for him."

James flashed his light over the black car before he answered.

"What you say may be true enough, Jon, but Royal has a right to go where he likes, and stay where he likes, and you can't complain if Mrs. Baxter or your friend on the telephone slams the front door in your face if you disturb them now. All the same, there is something very unusual about all this. Royal can't have forgotten that he left you in charge of his shop but he might have been taken ill. I admit I'm puzzled about that old black car. A visitor, or a doctor would have left their car outside the front door, and that old vehicle over there doesn't look the sort of car Mrs. Baxter would use. I'm beginning to wonder if we're not making fools of ourselves and that Mr. Royal will come home in the morning because he didn't want to risk a drive back in the snow."

"That won't do," Jon argued. "If he was going to stay the night surely his car would have been put under cover in a garage. There were plenty of closed doors round the yard. That foreign chap lied to me. Anyone who answers the telephone must know who is in the house. He was trying to put me off."

"Cool down, chum," David said. "James is right. We've got no right here and Royal is not any business of ours. Mrs. Flowerdew is, but we've forgotten all about her. I suggest we take a look through that window and then make for home."

Snow was settling as they crept up to the french windows which opened on to the terrace. As they suspected, the curtains had not been drawn right across and Jon, who was in front, could see into the room. Facing the window, sitting upright in a straight-backed chair and looking small and frail was Mrs. Flowerdew... Sitting on her right a few feet away was a small, well-dressed woman with tinted grey hair. She was staring at the old lady with a cruel smile on her face while a big man, with heavy horn-rimmed glasses and a cigar in his mouth was leaning threateningly towards her across a small table.

Jon, with one hand on the handle of the door, stepped back to report. As he did so he felt the door move a little.

"Royal isn't there," he whispered. "A big man and a woman I've never seen before are threatening Mrs. Flowerdew by the look of it. I don't think the door is locked. If I can open it an inch or so and we can get close enough we should be able to hear. Shall we risk it?"

James nodded. Jon stood to one side behind the curtain and the others knelt in the snow on each side of him. Very, very gently he turned the handle and eased the door open and without any straining they heard Mrs. Flowerdew's clear voice.

"It is not of the slightest use for you both to threaten me. In spite of what you say I have not lost my memory. I distinctly remember you forcing your way into my house, and I am sure that when I refused to sell you my home and my husband's books you drugged me and brought me here. I neither know nor care who you are except that you are obviously criminals and you have proved yourselves to be liars. I demand to be taken back to Rye at once."

Then the woman threatened her.

"We have talked enough, Mrs. Flowerdew. It is true that I drugged you. Unless you will tell us exactly what your husband has left hidden in your house I will drug you again in a much more unpleasant manner, and you will not even know what you are telling us."

At this the intrepid old lady actually laughed.

"You can threaten of course. I suppose you could eventually force me to tell you something, but it wouldn't be the truth because I do not know what my husband has left for me. Not only are you both greedy and ill-bred but you are clumsy. My absence from home will be noticed by now. You would not be able to get into my house for I no longer live alone. I have recently made many friends. You cannot frighten me."

"Nobody knows where you are," the man argued reasonably. "You don't know yourself. All we ask, Mrs. Flowerdew, is that you will work with us. We will help you to find what your husband has left. We would rather work with you than against you. You will tell us what that clue means so that we can find what is hidden and share it with you - or you will stay here and we shall use different methods of persuasion. It is late and Mrs. Baxter will show you to your room unless you co-operate with us. This is your last chance. What do you say?"

"I say fiddlesticks. I despise you both. I am not sure of the current colloquialism but I consider you both to be crooks and, come to think of it, I believe that ridiculous man who calls himself Royal - most ill-bred of him - must be as bad as you are. He's been worrying me too. You are all quite absurd."

This was too much for the man who called himself Purvis. He stepped forward threateningly and grabbed her wrist. She looked at him bravely as she said,

"You cannot frighten me. My friends will find me."

11. The Widow Courageous

When Mrs. Flowerdew was hustled into the old saloon car, she was aware of what was happening, but she could neither feel nor speak. At first, her brain was clear but her willpower had gone. She recognized the streets of Rye, she saw the snow falling gently and she tried hard to bang on the window and shout for help. No sound came from her lips and the hand clutching her bag did not move. She was helpless as the woman sitting next to her forced her fingers from her handbag and took it from her.

She did not know how long it was before the effect of the nerve drug began to wear off. Perhaps she had dozed a little but she was first roused by the noise of the car. Then her feet and hands began to tingle and she was aware that her head was aching. Cautiously she flexed her fingers which once again were grasping the handle of her bag. They moved, and she realized that she would soon have some control of her muscles.

The man driving was now smoking a cigar and the smell upset her. The thought of being sick in this car with these hateful people not only disgusted her but made her furiously angry.

She made a great effort, and although at first she did not recognize her own voice she realized with relief that she could speak again.

"Take me back to Rye at once," she croaked. "I am feeling ill."

The woman leaned across her and flashed a torch into her eyes so that she flinched and turned her head away.

"Don't distress yourself, Mrs. Flowerdew. We know you are unwell. You were taken ill when we were with you in your own home, but you won't remember this because you have lost your memory. We didn't like to leave you there because you were alone but we shall look after you now."

Mrs. Flowerdew pushed away the torch.

"How dare you molest me and tell such lies? You are abducting me," and she began to bang on the car window and shout for help.

Mrs. Baxter, who was surprisingly strong, forced her head back against the seat.

"Keep quiet and still, Mrs. Flowerdew. If you will not behave yourself we shall have to give you a strong sedative."

The old lady relaxed and closed her eyes. She knew now that she was in grave danger and would only exhaust herself if she struggled. Perhaps if she was clever she could discover the identity of these two and find out what was really happening. That was what she must do. Be clever and hope that a chance would come for her to escape and let Mrs. Warrender or her young friends know where she was. Deep down, in spite of her distress, she felt a fierce anger against these two who had dared to force their way into her house and made her suffer these indignities.

"Very well," she whispered. "I cannot understand what is happening to me or why I am here, but please be kind and take me back to Rye. I would rather be at home."

The woman put the torch on the seat between them.

"That's more sensible, Mrs. Flowerdew. If you do as you're told no harm will come to you."

So Mrs. Flowerdew kept quiet and tried to think clearly. Mrs. Baxter asked her several questions about her husband but she pretended not to understand and refused to answer. These tactics were successful and at last she was left to her thoughts. Up till this evening, in spite of the message in the book, she had doubted whether her husband had hidden anything really valuable in the house. She had not doubted that the document might be of interest to a historian, and although she had enjoyed her dreams of a wonderful Christmas, these had been based on hope rather than reality. But now she realized that these people were actually prepared to kidnap her because they had heard about the message. What was happening to her now was real enough and her hands clutched her bag as she realized that the actual paper

was inside it. Dimly she remembered some interference with this bag but she could not be sure. Had she really lost her memory?

Then she felt the car slowing down and opened her eyes. They were in a village street and, soon after, the headlights picked out an open gateway in a wall of Sussex flints and they turned through on to a drive between trees. The car bumped badly and it was difficult to catch more than a glimpse of a big house ahead before they turned sharply left. Just before it swung round she saw what looked like an arched entrance to a courtyard in which a small van was standing.

They stopped before an imposing porch and while Mrs. Baxter helped her out a light was switched on and the door opened by an un-prepossessing man.

The American, still with a cigar in his mouth, got out and nodded curtly to the servant. "Put your car away," he ordered. "We shall be in the library room. Don't disturb us unless we ring. No telephone calls. See that a bedroom is made ready for our guest who will probably be staying the night. All quiet upstairs?"

The man gave a surly nod and looked curiously at the old lady before stepping out into the snow.

Mrs. Flowerdew was now on her mettle. She felt much better and because she was affronted and angry and despised her captors, she was strengthened by a newly discovered courage. She knew that she would need all this courage and all her wits too, if she was going to get out of this trouble safely, and as Mrs. Baxter, with her hand on her arm, led her into the big, stone-flagged hall she was thinking hard.

What she had seen of the house in the headlights of the car suggested that she was now a prisoner in a small mansion in good repair. Her captors seemed to be affluent, but why did they use an old car belonging to their unpleasant manservant? And was the suggestion of a room to be prepared for her an empty threat?

Mrs. Baxter barely glanced at her as she opened a door on the left of the hall and led the way into a library, very much bigger and better furnished than her own. Mrs. Flowerdew noticed wooden shutters across the windows and the embers of a wood fire in the hearth. The American, who had left his hat and coat in the hall, followed them in, then went to the shelves on the right of the fireplace and removed three volumes. He then took a key from his pocket, put his hand into the space left by the books and unlocked and opened another door of which the shelves were a part.

"After you, Mrs. Flowerdew," he gestured. "This is my workroom. Sometimes I call it my thinkroom and right now we are going to have a cosy little chat."

She walked in with her head held high, determined to show no trace of fear. The small, secret room was furnished with a sideboard on which was a tray of drinks, a small table, two easy chairs and a straight-backed chair facing french windows across which Mrs. Baxter hurriedly drew the curtains.

"You will be more comfortable in this chair, Mrs. Flowerdew," Purvis suggested as he pulled forward the upright chair, and then reclined in one of the easy chairs facing her and produced his cigar case.

"I should be obliged if you would not smoke in my presence," she said firmly. "Cigars offend me."

To her surprise he did as he was asked. "Now Mrs. Flowerdew, my sister has gone to rustle up some refreshment and while she is about such simple domestic duties I must ask you to listen carefully to my proposition."

She said nothing, and once again he pleaded the case of the rich American who collects old documents, books and parchments from English homes. He explained that it was difficult for those who lived in a country with such a long history and tradition to appreciate what something which was really old meant to a collector like himself.

"I have already told you, before I was forcibly abducted, that I do not intend to sell anything from my home in Rye. Why should you think I shall change my mind because you have forced me here against my will? Tell me who

you really are. Even if I did agree, how do I know that you have any money, or if you have, whether you will pay me what you say? How can I trust anybody who forces their way into my home, threatens me, drugs me and then abducts me? I can't remember if you told me your name but if you did I should be tempted to believe that it does as well as any other. If you really are an American citizen, I am bound to say that I am proud of my own nationality."

As she refolded her hands in her lap she saw Purvis change colour and, for a moment, she wondered whether she had gone too far. Fortunately, as he opened his mouth to reply, Mrs. Baxter came back with a tray of sandwiches. At first Mrs. Flowerdew refused to eat, fearing that the food might be drugged, but when the other two helped themselves, and because she was hungry, she accepted food and was glad to do so. She refused alcohol and, to waste time while she gained strength, she asked for tea and Mrs. Baxter again left the room.

While she was away, Purvis tried to bribe her, but for at least half an hour, Mrs. Flowerdew won a battle of wits. Sometimes she pretended not to hear, and at others she just said she did not understand what he was talking about. Occasionally she nodded and shook her head in such a way that his questions seemed meaningless.

When Mrs. Baxter returned with the tea - Mrs. Flowerdew wondered what had happened to the surly manservant - she took over the questioning while Purvis, in spite of the widow's protests, lit a cigar.

"Now Mrs. Flowerdew," she said, as the old lady sniffed suspiciously at her tea and put the cup down untasted. "The play-acting is over. We have given you every chance to co-operate. You lost your memory and we helped you and even now we are ready to help you find the Elizabethan document which your husband put in a safe place... It is no use pretending that you don't know what I mean. I have here the clue in his handwriting. I took it from your bag when I was looking after you in the car... See. Here it is. We have been very patient with you but we are sure that you know what the document is and where it is likely to be found. Tell us at once before you regret your stubborn silence."

Mrs. Flowerdew feared the woman more than the man. She was sitting in a chair a few feet away and as she spoke she stared at her with a cruel smile on her smooth face. Purvis was leaning towards her across a small table, and as she tried to meet his gaze bravely, she saw the curtains move a little as if a draught disturbed them. For more than an hour she had been facing the french windows, and she was reasonably sure that if the curtains had moved before she would have noticed. Was it possible that somebody was outside? Should she shout for help or should she play for time? She chose to do the latter, hoping that if help were near there would be another sign.

So she defied them, and as the man got up and grabbed her arm she saw another movement of the curtains, and when she raised her voice and said, "You cannot frighten me. My friends will find me," it was in faith as much as hope.

But she had barely finished speaking before there was a crash as the window was flung back, and the boys Jonathan and David, followed by a personable young man wearing a sheepskin jacket, strode into the room.

"Here are your friends, Mrs. Flowerdew," the former said coolly. "We've come to take you home," and then, turning to Mrs. Baxter, "You must excuse this unconventional entrance but we have had difficulty in contacting you. We're also anxious to have a word with Mr. Royal whose car we identified in the yard. This puzzles us because when I telephoned earlier from Rye whoever answered denied that Mr. Royal was here."

While Jon was speaking, David moved across to stand beside Mrs. Flowerdew's chair. She looked up at him with tears in her eyes as he told her not to worry, and that James was a friend who had brought them over to fetch her.

Mrs. Baxter had no chance to act the outraged hostess because Purvis roared and ranted through a performance of an angry American millionaire protecting his widowed sister from insults. When he paused for breath, James Wilson, still standing in front of the window with his hands in his pockets, suggested that he save his breath.

"My name is Wilson, sir. I represent the *Clarion* and these young friends are known to Mrs. Flowerdew who was abducted from her own home in Rye a few hours ago. The police are looking for her and we intend to take her home. Should you, or your sister, whom we presume to be Mrs. Peregrine Baxter and who was visited by Mr. Royal this afternoon, have any complaint to make, no doubt----"

At this moment the hidden door was flung back and the manservant, without stepping right into the room shouted, "Come at once! The fool Royal has gone. I hear his car go. He got out of the window making a rope of the curtains."

In the silence that followed this hysterical outburst he crossed the threshold and saw, not only the horrified faces of his employers, but the three strangers. He also saw Mrs. Flowerdew rise with dignity from her chair and take Jon's arm.

"Thank you, my dear boys. I was sure you would come for me. May we leave at once? I have had rather a disturbing evening and I have no idea of the time. You see, I have never been drugged nor abducted before."

Purvis opened his mouth to speak and stepped in front of the windows. James stood his ground.

"Don't do anything an American citizen would regret," he smiled. "We're on our way. Come, Mrs. Flowerdew. Your car is waiting."

David pushed back the windows and stood aside as the others led the old lady out into the snow. He did not trouble to look back or to close the windows as he followed.

The walk down the drive seemed endless, but James was confident that there was nothing the others could do and he was sure they would not follow them.

"Nothing is more important than getting you back to Rye, Mrs. Flowerdew," he went on. "Will you permit me to say that it is an honour to be of service to such a courageous lady? Try not to worry and don't try to tell us

everything that happened to you now. You must rest. As soon as we have a chance we will telephone the Dolphin and they will tell the police that you are safe... Now here's our car. Into the back seat with Jonathan, please, and David in front with me. I shall have to drive slowly because it is now going to snow heavily."

The journey back to Rye was a nightmare. The first half-hour was the worst as James had to stop several times so that David could clear frozen snow from the windscreen, and he had to drive with extreme care as the snow drifted through gaps in hedges across the road. Just when there was a break in the clouds and the blizzard abated David shouted a warning as they took a right bend. James braked with caution and stopped a yard or so from a blue Mini which was slewed across the road, half in a ditch and half in a snowdrift. Fortunately its lights were still on but the engine was not running. "I swear that's Royal's," David said as he jumped out. "Help me, Jon. He may be inside."

They found him slumped over the wheel unconscious, but breathing heavily and there was no sign of any serious injury. James took charge and first they righted the van and moved it off the road.

"We can't leave Royal," he said. "And I can't take him to hospital first and upset Mrs. Flowerdew who is our responsibility. We must tell the police and get an ambulance at once. David and I will stay here and look after Mrs. F. and see that nobody runs into us, and you, Jon, must find a telephone. When you've told the police, ring the Dolphin and let your mother know we're on our way with this courageous old dear. Don't worry Mrs. Warrender... I know where we are now and there's a village at the bottom of this hill. If there's no call box or a policeman's house you'll have to knock up somebody who's got a telephone. Good luck."

Jon was off almost before James had finished speaking and was in a call box within ten minutes. The police were brisk and efficient and promised help at once and an ambulance as soon as they could get one. Next Jon telephoned his mother and reassured her with the news that Mrs. Flowerdew was safe and well and that they were on the way home.

"She's had a tough time, Mother. Would you mind asking the girls to get her room warm and ready because she'll have to be tucked up in bed as soon as she arrives? No time to tell you more now but you needn't worry. Sorry to be so late but you'll understand when we explain. And please tell Judith that her husband has got a wonderful story... Cheerio. See you soon."

It seemed a long walk up the hill and he got back a few minutes before the police car arrived. David was looking after Mrs. Flowerdew and had wrapped her in his duffle coat, and James was in the Mini trying to get some sense out of Royal who was now conscious but obviously badly shocked.

James explained to the police why he must get Mrs. Flowerdew home to Rye at once and told them briefly what they had overheard at Holford Court and that Royal had escaped from there.

"No doubt you'll be able to get those two for abduction, but we don't know yet where Royal fits in. We'll all be available at Rye in the morning but I must get off now. O.K.?"

An hour later they drove into Trader's Street. The snow was crisp and unbroken on the cobbles and there were lights in the windows of thirty-nine and shining on the sign of the wicked old dolphin next door. James sighed with relief, switched off the engine and turned to David.

"The end of a perfect day, my friend," he said. "I have a feeling that we're going to get into trouble. Better leave all explanations to me... You're home, Mrs. Flowerdew!"

"She's asleep on my shoulder," Jon whispered. "What to do?"

Then the front door opened to disclose Judith, Penny and Peter all looking angry and anxious but very attractive in slacks and sweaters. James got out first.

"Please, please don't argue or be mad with us now," he pleaded. "We can't bear it. We're all heroes and we're all O.K. and the police are on the trail of two villains and Mr. Royal is on his way to hospital but you, our loved

ones, must get into bed the bravest lady I've ever met. Now, Mrs. Flowerdew, you really are home again."

Penny ran forward as David and Jon helped her out of the car. She seemed refreshed by her sleep, and when she recognized the girls she straightened her shoulders and, arm in arm with the boys, she smiled and said:

"How very nice to be home again, my dears. And how kind of you to greet me. I do hope nobody has been anxious on my account, but I have had a most interesting experience and been rescued by these three nice young men."

12. Dickie Gets His Story

But for a bar of light across the ceiling from a street lamp, it was dark when Dickie woke next morning. For a moment he wondered where he was and then realized that he was in Jon's bed in the Dolphin. He turned over and remembered the astonishing events of last evening, and was even more surprised that he had slept through the night and did not know whether Mrs. Flowerdew had come home.

Jon's room had a window built out over the pavement so that you could see up Trader's Street, over the edge of the cliff at the end to the mouth of the river and the sea beyond Rye Harbour. Tradition maintained that this room was used by smugglers as a look-out - either for the sign of a friendly flashing lantern on the Marsh to say that contraband was on the way, or for Redcoats or Preventive Officers on the prowl.

Jon always slept with the head of the bed right under the window so it was easy for Dickie to sit up and draw the curtains back. The light from the lamp outside was enough to see his wrist-watch. Half-past six.

He wondered whether Mary was awake. He knew the way to Penny's room but hesitated before getting out of bed and putting on some clothes. Mrs. Warrender might take a poor view of twins wandering about her hotel at this time of the morning and he did not want to upset her. But Dickie, when awake, disliked inaction and, more than anything else, he now wanted to know what had happened last night after they had been sent off to bed like babies. Then he realized that there was nothing to stop him going out in the snow and seeing whether any of the others sleeping next door were awake. If they were not, he relished the idea of rousing them.

So he put on some clothes and quietly closed the door behind him. But for a subdued humming the hotel was quiet. The lights were on in the corridors and outside each numbered room were one or two pairs of shoes. The noise was louder as he padded along the soft carpet and as he turned the corner on to the landing he saw Mary, leaning over the banisters and looking down

into the hall. She could not have heard him but when he was a few yards away she turned and smiled.

"Hello!" she whispered. "I was coming to wake you up but was scared that I might not know Jon's room. That noise down there is Vasson using his electric cleaner. I was going to surprise him and ask what happened after we came in here last night. You don't know do you, Dickie? No, I can see you don't. You look bleary-eyed and depressed. I'm worried about Mrs. Flowerdew too. Let's go and ask Fred. I'm fed up with not knowing what's going on.

Dickie nodded and they went down the staircase together. Fred, in a green baize apron, walking into view when they had six steps to go, was so surprised to see them that he switched off the motor of the cleaner. The sudden, dramatic silence was broken by Mary.

"*Good* morning, Fred, and very nearly a happy Christmas to you. We have come to ask your help."

Fred regarded them suspiciously. He liked these two. They amused him and he appreciated their enterprise, good manners and loyalty to each other, but he was still cautious. Every time they had been here they had been up to something, and this morning he was tired because he had not had much sleep.

"And the same to you both," he said gravely. "What do you want and why are you up so early? I got my work to do as you know very well and I got no time to spare for a chat this morning."

Dickie decided correctly that it would pay to be journalistically brief.

"Just tell us please, Fred, is Mrs. Flowerdew safe home and what happened? We've only just got up and we don't know a thing. Nobody tells us but we know you will."

"No harm in telling. The old lady was brought home in his car by Mr. Wilson and your brother and Jonathan 'bout one o'clock. Far as I know she's O.K. but I dunno where she'd been. Mrs. Warrender told me somebody

telephoned her 'bout midnight - Jonathan I reckon - and she went in next door with the two girls and Mrs. Wilson. The boss is in her room here now and you'll be in trouble if she catches you a' gossipin' with me. Mr. and Mrs. Wilson came in here late."

"Thank you very much, but is that all the news you know, Fred?" Dickie asked.

"There's been plenty of snow in the night and it's froze hard and I did hear that Mr. Royal had some sort of accident. And the other news is that I've got my work to do and you mustn't bother me any more... Where are you going now?"

Mary tried to look as if she needed the help of a strong man. "Don't be cross with us please, Fred. We know you're our friend but we were turned away from our beds last night and nobody except you seems to care what happens to us and it's a long time to breakfast. May we sit downstairs in the warm while you're working, and presently when it's time for you to have a cup of tea p'raps we could join you?"

Vasson fell for this as Mary knew he would.

"Long as you don't interfere with my work you can sit down quiet by the fire here. It's been alight all night - we never lets it out - and I've just made it up. We'll see about that tea later."

So they went into the lounge and sat down companionably on the great hearth at the back of which an enormous log was smouldering. It was warm here and as the sound of Vasson's cleaner hummed in the distance, Dickie explained what was in his mind.

"Now that we know Mrs. Flowerdew is O.K. and that everybody else has forgotten about us, there's no reason why we shouldn't do something on our own is there, Mary?"

"You mean try to find what the message said that is hidden *in* something? Find it and give it to Mrs. Flowerdew for a Christmas present?"

"That's it. And the first place to search is that library, and I suppose we should take every book off the shelves and look behind as well as inside each one. We could hardly do that without the others knowing, could we?"

Mary got up and held her hands to the flames flickering at each end of the big log. Then she turned and looked thoughtfully down at her twin. Dickie was frowning too and until his sister spoke they looked exactly alike.

"It would be super if we could find it, Dickie. I was wondering whether 'hidden in' does mean inside a book, but I suppose that would be an obvious place to hide a document. Or behind a book if it was big enough... And how can we get into the library and do all that searching without the others knowing?... Dickie, I wonder if it could be behind the walls or behind a picture? We shall have to think of a way of getting into the library and having a quick look round. If the front door of thirty-nine isn't locked maybe we could have a quick look before breakfast? I bet the others are sunk in swinish sloth."

"You've given us an idea, Mary. Didn't Jon, or somebody, tell us that there are cellars which were used by smugglers under most of the houses in Trader's Street? Or was it Fred? Let's ask him. The idea was that a smuggler on the run might get right up the street underground. Why don't we explore the Dolphin cellars now and see if there's a way through to thirty-nine? Maybe we could get right *under* the Flowerdew library----"

Mary was on her way almost before he had finished speaking. They had often been in Vasson's workroom which opened on to the hotel yard and it was here, when he was off duty, that he had told them many stories about Rye and Romney Marsh. He seemed pleased to see them and produced two extra mugs so that they could share his early morning tea.

"Did you know I'm going to be a journalist like Mr. Wilson?" Dickie began. "He's going to help me and has given me a sort of homework to do. I've got to write what he calls a 'piece' on smugglers. Will you help me, Fred? Mary is working with me but I've remembered what you told us about the cellars under the street here and we want to explore them. Now, before breakfast."

"Not all of them, of course," Mary added hurriedly, "but would you allow us to look at your cellars and see if there's a way into number thirty-nine next door? Please Fred, and will you lend us that big electric lantern you've got there?"

"What do you want to do under Flowerdews?"

"We want to help her to find a treasure which her husband has hidden for her," Dickie said. "We were going to tell you, Fred, but you must swear not to tell the others. Not even Mrs. Warrender yet because we want to surprise them all."

"I bet you do," Fred chuckled. "I never heard tell of a treasure, but like as not the old lady could do with one. If I lets you down there will you promise not to go farther than thirty-nine? Come to think of it, if you wait until this evening I'll come with you."

They knew then that they had won and it was not difficult to persuade him that they must go now before the others were about. He knew how independent they were and also that they would keep their promise, so he agreed to open up the Dolphin cellars and to give them half an hour to explore before coming to fetch them.

"And what will I do if Mrs. Warrender asks for you? She's often about by now."

"If she does happen to ask for us, please say that we shan't be long, Fred. You can say that we are trying to help Mrs. Flowerdew with a bit of exploring and that you know where we are because we told you and that we are taking Macbeth to guard us. Poor little darling dog is asleep in my room. I'll fetch him now."

Five minutes later they were under the Dolphin. On the left, at the foot of the stone steps was a locked iron grille which led into the wine cellars. Vasson switched on the light and showed them the rows of racks holding hundreds of bottles.

"You can't go in there," he said. "Those cellars don't lead anywhere else. The smugglers passage which leads into your room at the top of the house but is now blocked up runs down the side of the wine cellars but not through them... Sure you want to explore the rest now you're down here? I don't reckon liddle dog thinks much of it."

It was true that Macbeth was showing no enthusiasm for subterranean exploration. His tail was down and he was shivering as Mary stooped to comfort him.

"Where does it lead to the right?" Dickie whispered. "Is there electric light all the way?"

"Only in the first cellar and it's switched on for you now. Sure you want to go on or will you wait for me to come with you tonight?"

Dickie was tempted. The light in this first cellar did not do much to dispel the gloom. Beyond the shadows, in the far corners, there might be an unknown maze of passages and secret chambers which had never been lit by daylight.

"There wouldn't be rats, would there, Fred?" Mary asked in a small voice.

"No, lass, there would not. And if there were your liddle dog would be after 'em... Now see what I've brought you. There's enough in the battery of this lantern to last for hours and here's a bit o' white chalk and you can mark the walls as you go just to be sure you know the way back... If you don't want to go now, nobody else will know, will they? I shan't tell 'em."

"O.K. Fred," Dickie said firmly. "We'll go and thanks for helping us. I won't forget to put you in my story and we won't go farther than the next lot of cellars and we won't be more than half an hour, we promise. It's just that we want to help Mrs. Flowerdew now..."

"Get along with you!" Fred laughed. "You want to do summat on your own as usual and surprise 'em all. Not to worry. I'll be after you if you don't turn up soon. If I'm not in my room when you come up just leave a note saying, 'Safe back. Found a million pounds,' and I'll know you're O.K... I'll leave

this light on and the door at the top o' steps will be unlocked... Sure you're O.K.?"

They nodded, and to Fred's surprise Mary shook his hand as if she was not going to see him for years. Then they stood still until the sound of his steps on the stairs died away and they knew that he had closed but not locked the door at the top. They knew too that, except for the faithful Macbeth, they were now alone.

"If we don't do something soon my teeth will chatter," Mary said. "I've got Mackie on the lead so he can't escape so let's move and get it over."

"O.K., O.K.," Dickie said loudly. "No need to whisper. We said we'd do it and we will... You take the chalk and mark the old trail and I'll take the torch and go first... Good old Fred! He's on our side."

"He always was," Mary agreed fervently, and she was not really scared any more because she knew that he would never have allowed them to do this if there had been any real danger.

Like so many things we worry about before they happen, their journey into the cellars of the next house was not really frightening. As on many other occasions they were together and Macbeth did plenty of sniffing around and showed no signs of alarm. The air was fresh but not too cold and the brick walls were dry. The floor was uneven, and in the two smaller cellars which led out of the main chamber there were some old trunks and other junk. Mackie investigated these relics, and when they had satisfied themselves that there was nothing else of interest, the beam of Fred's big torch picked out a brick archway. When they moved closer they saw that this had once been closed with a door which now hung, half rotting, from its hinges. The passage beyond smelled stale and when Mary touched the rough walls they were damp.

"Can you see the end, twin? I don't like this much. I suppose this will lead us to the Flowerdew cellars and if we can't find anything quickly let's go back. My teeth have started again. I can't help it."

What Dickie hated most was the silence. He did not mind the dark particularly, but when they stopped or were not talking, the quiet was something you could almost feel. And, of course, they were now completely cut off from the friendly world upstairs where Fred would be about his duties and the guests at the Dolphin would be waking up, and Mrs. Warrender might already be asking awkward questions.

He tried not to think of these things as the passage turned sharply to the right before leading into another cellar. Mary felt for his hand as they stood side by side and looked at what their light showed. This cellar was smaller than any of those under the Dolphin and contained a lot more rubbish. In one corner a flight of wooden steps led up to a doorway which had been bricked up and in another was a pile of rotting trunks.

"There's some letters painted on one of those," Mary whispered through chattering teeth. "Keep the light steady, Dickie."

He led her nearer until they were able to decipher the name C. J. FLOWERDEW in faded white paint.

"We're in the right place anyway," Dickie said, and swung the beam into another corner. Then, "Look, Mary. See what I see? That's an iron ladder fixed against the wall."

They ran across and the beam showed them a hinged trapdoor in the ceiling and to the right of it a cavity in the wall.

"I didn't think it could happen," Dickie gasped. "I mean that we should really find something. This must be a secret way into thirty-nine. I'll go up first with the light."

"I'm coming up after you. Wait while I tie Mackie's lead to the bottom of the ladder. He mustn't wander off in these ghastly cellars."

Holding the lantern in his right hand and directing the beam to the trapdoor above him, Dickie soon saw that this was secured by a flat bolt moved by a knob. There were traces of oil on the former and it looked as if it would slide easily in the socket and allow the door to open downwards. At that

moment Macbeth began to bark and Mary went down to quieten him. It was then that Dickie directed the beam into the cavity which was about eighteen inches high and saw that the roof of it was black with smoke.

"Look, Mary! I reckon this was built to hold the smuggler's lantern or candles while he worked the trap. If I put our lantern in, the light shines on the door... Hi! There's something at the back here. Mary, I've found something... It's a metal tube... Keep Mackie quiet. I'm coming down."

They sat on the floor and examined their find. It was an aluminium tube about nine inches long and one and a quarter inches in diameter. The screw-on cap was sealed with transparent tape, and on the barrel was written with a felt pen the name FLOWERDEW. Dickie passed it to his sister who held it to her ear and shook it.

"It's very light, Dickie, and it doesn't rattle... But of course it wouldn't. It's a 'dokkerment' and we've found it for the old lady. Clever old us!"

Dickie seemed disappointed. All this fuss and mystery just for a metal tube. Even if it turned out to be worth a lot of money it wasn't very exciting.

"O.K. So we've got it," he said. "Before we go back with it I'd like to know what's the other side of that trapdoor. My guess, it's old man Flowerdew's library. Let's try and open it and see where we are. You go first and have a go while I keep Mackie quiet. Be careful with the bolt in case the trap has got something heavy on it and falls on your head... Have your teeth stopped making a row or will they start again when you're up there?"

Mary flashed him a smile, grabbed the torch and went up the ladder like a monkey. She put the torch in the niche made for it, and with one hand flat on the trap she eased the bolt with the other. It slid gently out of its socket and the door moved towards her. She was surprised to see a gleam of light and then realized that something, which might be a large book, was resting on the floor above and virtually covering the trapdoor. She turned and gestured to Dickie and was even more surprised to hear David's voice in the room above.

"Even if the girls are awake they'll probably be fussing over the old lady. There must be something hidden in this room, Jon. Royal thought so and so did that nasty couple who were here last night. Nobody will be about yet and as all we want to do is to help Mrs. F. I suggest we move every book on the shelves until we find a clue. Somebody must be lucky so why not us? The twins will be mad, of course, but we could make a start now while nobody else is about. You begin on the top shelves and work down and I'll stack the books on the desk until we're sure there's nothing behind or inside them."

This was enough for the twins. Dickie, who had climbed up the ladder behind Mary and heard everything, insisted that she should close the trapdoor quietly. This she did and slid the bolt home before taking their torch and following him down the ladder.

Then, after embracing Mackie enthusiastically, they went back to the Dolphin cellars and sat for a few minutes on the bottom step laying their plans. The aluminium tube was difficult to hide, but eventually Mary stowed it under the waist of her jeans at the back and pulled her sweater well down over the lump.

"I shall have to walk backwards if too many people stare at me," she explained. "Soon as I can I'll dash up to Penny's room again and hide it under her mattress until we're ready to give it to Mrs. Flowerdew... Right, Dickie. Up we go and I don't care if it's the last time we ever go down there."

She carried Macbeth up the steep stairs and locked the door from the outside. Vasson was not in his room so they left the cellar key and the lantern on his bench with a note from the young journalist which read:

"Thank you very much for interesting and chilly experience. All is well and we are obliged for co-op. Here is key. Door is locked and light off. See you soon we hope."

R. & M"

On their way to their respective rooms they met a chambermaid who had a message for them from Mrs. Warrender, asking them to wait and have breakfast with her as soon as she returned. By the time they had washed themselves and perfected their plans, she came back in good spirits and took them into the hotel restaurant.

"Fred says he told you that Mrs. Flowerdew came home late last night," she began, as soon as they had ordered breakfasts which would have satisfied a giant. "Are you sure, Mary dear, that you can eat a kipper and eggs and bacon? You're very welcome but if I hadn't known what time you went to bed I might have wondered whether you'd been out most of the night with the others... Very well, you shall try. I must say you are both looking very smug and polished this morning, but the others are in rather a muddle next door. You can go in presently and they will tell you what happened. Mrs. Flowerdew has slept well and is going to stay in bed until her doctor has seen her. It was very frightening last night and I can tell you now that she was abducted and taken away in a car and rescued by Mr. Wilson, David and Jonathan... Here's your porridge which should give you a good start to an exciting day, and I want to thank you both for being so sensible and helpful last night and not making a fuss about sleeping in here and leaving the others."

Dickie said that was O.K. and gave his twin a warning glance. He had just seen James and Judith come into the restaurant and this had given him another idea. He certainly did not want Mary getting soft and telling Mrs. Warrender how much they knew and what had given them such good appetites.

Mary took the hint and although Mrs. Warrender was charmed by their good manners, she wondered why they did not ask more questions. It was not surprising that she finished her meal before her guests.

"Please excuse me, twins, but I have a lot to do. Stay as long as you like and you may go next door when you are ready."

When she had gone, Dickie suggested that they should go and talk to James.

"We've got something he would like to know about, Mary, and before we go over to see those other skunks, I'd like to know exactly what happened last night. And I mean exactly."

So they strolled nonchalantly across the restaurant to the Wilsons' table in the corner and asked if they might join them.

"Just for a short chat, James and Judith. We can see that you both look rather tired this morning, but we have exclusive news for you, James. No fooling. Mary and I were up early this morning about some special business which will interest you."

James actually scowled at him.

"Honest, James. We're not fooling. Nobody, not even Mrs. Warrender, knows yet, and although we'll never forgive you for deserting us and going off on an adventure without us, I'll give you an exclusive story if you will put us in your paper, because that will be very good for me one day when I want a job on the *Clarion*. And you or Judith must tell us exactly what happened last night. Will you do that?"

Judith looked at Mary who nodded.

"It's true, Judith. We really have got fantastic news. Honest!"

James relented and the four of them went into a corner of the lounge where he told them what happened at Holford Court and of Mr. Royal and of how they brought Mrs. Flowerdew home.

Dickie, in return, told him how they knew that the brave old lady was apparently little the worse for her adventure and begged James to stay in the hotel until one of them came to call them next door.

"It might be an hour, James, but I swear you won't be sorry for trusting us. You're going to have a Christmas story!"

So, ten minutes later, the twins and Macbeth arrived at thirty-nine and managed without much effort to add to a scene of considerable confusion.

The front door was on the latch and the door to the library was open so they started there and at first neither Jon nor David noticed them.

Jon was up the ladder collecting books from the top shelves and passing them down to David who was trying to stack them in order in piles on the floor. Dr. Flowerdew's desk was already covered with books and the air was thick with dust. The two boys were obviously getting short-tempered because Jon would pass down more books than David, below him on the ladder, could carry and which he invariably dropped.

After an appropriate interval Dickie greeted them.

"Good morning, both. We hope you slept and breakfasted well. We have come to help you with the spring-cleaning although we can't think why."

"Why," Mary asked, "why are you both so industrious and dirty and angry? Did you think you would find Mrs. Flowerdew's treasure without us when we are the people she told about it?"

"And don't trouble to make excuses or try to explain why none of you came in to tell *us* about your adventures. *Don't trouble*. Spare your breath for sucking in dust. We know what happened because James has just told us... And you be careful on that ladder, Jonathan. You don't look safe. Let me hold it for you."

And Dickie dashed across the room, stumbled into a pile of books and scattered them, clutched at another lot on the desk and knocked them to the floor. As David shouted angrily Mary stumbled into him and begged him to greet Macbeth who was now barking excitedly at his heels. Then Jon dropped the books he was holding, lost his balance, jumped and brought the ladder down with him.

While they were still sorting themselves out, Peter and Penny rushed in from the kitchen in time to save the twins from David's wrath.

"Take them away - and the dog," Jon gasped as he struggled up from the floor. "They've gone mad. They say they've come to help but they're absolutely bonkers."

"Hello girls," Mary said cheerfully as she pushed some more books off a chair and sat down. "How have you been getting on without us? If you want a treat and to know what you're both in for one day you should stay and watch these big, strong boys doing a little housework... And it's no use Jon saying that we're bonkers. When we came in he was banging on the wall. And while he's got that ladder we think he ought to wash the walls down."

Penny and Peter looked at the twins and then at their angry and dishevelled loved ones. Penny was the first to laugh and it was Peter who grabbed Mary and led her to the door.

"You too, Dickie. Outside both of you. I've something to say... Out you come."

She took them into the kitchen, sat on the edge of the table and wasted no words.

"I know you two better than Penny. I agree that you're very funny and I know that you've been up to something. Come clean. You know everything that happened I suppose?"

"Nearly everything," Mary agreed. "We have been conferring with James. We know we have been ignored and neglected and although we are blood members of the same club we have been deserted by the other members. We do not think this is funny-----"

"But we think those two louts in there are funnier than they know," Dickie interrupted. "We also know that Mrs. Flowerdew is in good health after her abduction and I desire an interview with her. If you ask her I am sure she will be glad to see us. There are some understanding and intelligent adults who are always glad to see us."

"That is possible," Peter agreed. "I'm not entirely adult but I am very glad to see you. Why do you want to see Mrs. Flowerdew?"

"We're serious about this, Peter," Mary said. "We agree about you - that you're a good Lone Piner, I mean - but we want to see Mrs. Flowerdew because we've found something with her name on it. We haven't looked

inside whatever-it-is yet because it's hers, and it's no good looking at us like that because we haven't got it here. It's hidden, but we're sure that is what everybody is fussing about. She must see it first and until she's ready we enjoy watching those boys playing about with those books."

"I see," Peter said. "You wouldn't tell me privately what you've found, would you?"

"No, we wouldn't. Acksherly, as we used to say when we were young, acksherly we are still furious with you all, but not you as much as the others. Come on, Dickie. You'll get your story presently, but let's go back to the library before those two pull the place down... No, you go with Peter and I'll go back to the Dolphin for James and Judith... We're serious about this, Peter, so please ask Mrs. Flowerdew if she will see us."

"We'll ask her after the doctor has been. I think she's wonderful and she wants to get up... So you've been clever twins have you? Don't take it out on the boys. They wouldn't take Penny and me either, you know. We just had to sit here and wait while you two were sleeping in the Dolphin... *Were* you sleeping by the way? I wish I knew what you'd been up to."

Mary was soon back with the Wilsons. Jon and David were still hot, dusty and annoyed and not speaking even to the two girls. Dickie, by now, had noticed in a corner, on the floor under the shelves, a set of encyclopaedias resting on a big atlas which he guessed was covering the trapdoor. When his twin came into the room he also noticed a suspicious lump under her sweater about her waistline and gave her an understanding wink. He was also aware that she must have given James a broad hint of surprises in store because he was certainly playing it cool. To David he said:

"Mary told us you were very active this morning. Couldn't you sleep?"

Jon came down the ladder with as much dignity as he could muster and dropped another pile of books on the floor.

"Lay off David," he said between clenched teeth. "All we wanted to do was to help Mrs. Flowerdew. We asked for no assistance from anybody else. All

we wanted to do was to work quietly and receive food occasionally from Penny and Peter. There's something going on here and I've a suspicion----

"It's more than a suspicion," David interrupted as he wiped his face with a filthy handkerchief. "Look at those twins! What do you know, Richard? And what's the matter with you, Mary? Why are you clutching your stomach? You can't possibly be starving."

Mary did not answer but nodded to Dickie who moved some more books off the table so that he could seat himself on it in more comfort.

"O.K., David. What we want to say is that if we were doing a spot of treasure-hunting on our own without informing our friends and loved ones or asking for their cooperation we should start at the bottom and work up. Why don't you two strong chaps - although you don't look as strong as you did yesterday - why don't you move those old books on the floor in the corner and see if there's anything underneath... and do not, if you please, make any more comments about my sister's stomach."

David stared at them in silence until his face broke into his usual good-natured smile. "You little devils! Have you really found something? Come over here, Dickie, and I'll help you move the books."

And so as the others crowded round they found the trapdoor and it was Mary who showed them the flat bolt which, like the one below, held it in position.

"Let Peter do it," she said. "She deserves to find a treasure on her first visit to Rye. Slide back the bolt and the trap will fall... There you are. You can't see anything without a torch, but there's a ladder down into the cellar."

Jon went on his knees beside Peter and peered into the dark depths. Then he looked at Dickie who was fidgeting about excitedly with his hands in his pockets and a broad grin on his face.

"And so, my little man, the cellars here can be reached through the Dolphin cellars? What else have you found while David and I have been spring-cleaning? The joke's on us, isn't it?"

"Never mind yet what we've found. I've got to discuss this with James. Make room for him, please, so that he can see all this is true... On your left, there's a little hole in the cellar wall where the smuggler put his lantern while opening the trapdoor... Have you found it, James? We think old man Flowerdew meant to say '*behind* the trap door' because that's where it was. And you'll keep your promise about your story? We'll be in it won't we? We found it."

James agreed. He was highly amused by the way in which the twins had dealt with the situation and liked the way the others accepted it.

"That's all right, Richard. You'll be in the story. Now show us what you found."

So Mary, from under her sweater, produced the sealed aluminium tube which they all agreed should be taken at once to Mrs. Flowerdew. Then, while they were all talking at once, Mrs. Warrender arrived and had to be told the full story.

"Fred told me where you were before breakfast, but I didn't guess you'd been so clever," she smiled. "I'll take this up to Mrs. Flowerdew at once and ask her to see you both. Meanwhile the younger members of this party might restore this room to order. Get it tidy before Mrs. Flowerdew sees it, else she'll have a relapse. And don't get too excited, because what's in this tube might be disappointing."

Ten minutes later she summoned the twins.

Mrs. Flowerdew was sitting up in bed wearing a dressing-gown of red flannel. Her hair was in wild disorder, but her eyes were as bright as a blackbird's and she seemed excited and happy.

"Now Richard and Mary," she began, "Mrs. Warrender has told me briefly what you have found and how you found it. I remember that you did promise to help me, so I said that I would not open this tube until you were both here. Before I do this I must tell you that I never knew there was a trapdoor in the library floor, and that years ago my husband had the entrance to our cellars bricked up. So all this is as much a surprise to me as

to you... If you will kindly fetch the nail scissors from the first drawer in my dressing-table, Mary, we will remove the sticking-plaster which seals the tube. I wish I knew how long ago this was placed in that odd hiding place... Thank you, my dear. Now to solve the mystery."

From inside the tube she withdrew with shaking fingers a small plastic bag in which were some papers. The first of these was a letter which Mrs. Flowerdew began to read in silence, but when she looked up tears were rolling down her cheeks. Mrs. Warrender went to her and put an arm round her thin shoulders.

"Shall we go, dear? Is it from your husband?"

"Yes, but please don't go yet. I am not really unhappy but I will read the rest of his letter when I am alone. It seems as if the document is of value and he tells me how it came into his possession and gives me a translation of what it says... See, Richard and Mary. Here is the document. Written in French by a Protestant refugee who came to Rye... See how neatly it is written. The ink has turned brown because it is nearly four hundred years old..."

Then Richard made a very sensible little speech.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Flowerdew, for letting us see your treasure and we are very glad we found it for you. Soon, when you are better, we would all like you to tell us everything about it because it will be good for our history. We would like to tell the others now but we swear we won't tell anybody else. And will you please keep it a secret too because I've promised to help Mr. Wilson, who would like to do a Christmas story for his newspaper about it, if you don't mind. If your doctor says you can get up presently, will you please come to our Christmas party in our secret room in the Dolphin this evening? We should like you to be our Guest of Honour. You needn't make a speech but you could tell us all about the document then."

Mrs. Flowerdew shed a few more tears - this time of appreciation - and the twins, realizing for once that they had combined charm with tact, retired with dignity and then rushed down the stairs to the others.

The four Lone Piners, with James and Judith, were working in the library with far more enthusiasm and success than Jon and David had done early that morning. They stopped for a few minutes while the twins told them what had happened and of the invitation extended to Mrs. Flowerdew. Judith was particularly excited about the document and James admitted that he would now have to wait for his story, and that in the meantime he would go and see the police and see if there was any news about Royal and the other two villains.

Before they had finished tidying the library the doctor had come and gone, leaving the news that Mrs. Flowerdew could get up at tea-time and go next door in the evening.

Mrs. Warrender, very pleased with everyone, suggested that they should give themselves a holiday without involvement with criminals, and promised that she would look after Mrs. Flowerdew for the rest of the day.

"So don't worry about either of us. You can lunch in the Dolphin if you like to come in early, or if you two girls like to go off with Jon and David for a few hours you can take my car and some sandwiches. As for the twins----"

"Good idea for the others," Mary smirked. "They could go in the woods and look for mistletoe and a little teeny-weeny bit of holly. Dickie and I will prepare tonight's banqueting-hall for our Guest of Honour and possibly take our faithful but neglected hound for a walk."

13. Lone Pine Party

At eight o'clock that same evening the twins were waiting at the foot of the staircase leading up to the Lone Piners' secret room. The young reporter was wearing a suit, a white shirt and an extremely gay tie, and his sister the dress which her mother had insisted she take for dinner on Christmas Day. Their hair shone and their faces beamed as they awaited their guests.

The Wilsons came first. James pretended not to recognize either of them but Judith gave Mary a hug and whispered "Wonderful, wonderful twins! Never seen you look nicer, darling."

Dickie took them up and before opening the door said over his shoulder to James, "Everything O.K.? You'll keep your promise about the story, James? We'll be in it?"

"You certainly will, Richard. Can't keep you out. We'll write it together tomorrow."

Dickie grinned happily as he flung open the door and announced them.

James and Judith stood on the threshold without speaking for a few moments. The old room was transformed. Coloured candles were burning on the table which had been covered with scarlet crepe paper and was loaded with food and drink. The ceiling light had a new gay shade from which hung a bunch of mistletoe, and the dark, panelled walls were festooned with holly, evergreens and old-fashioned paper chains. A log fire was crackling in the hearth and around it were four easy chairs. On the floor were coloured cushions. James and Judith took in the general scene with admiration, but neither of them had seen Penelope Warrender or Petronella Sterling look as charming as they did tonight. Although Penny was the first to run forward to welcome them it was Peter, who would never forget how Judith had helped her that night at the Book Cellar, who led her into the room and kissed her under the mistletoe. James also made the best of this opportunity, and while they were all talking and laughing, Mrs. Warrender

and Mrs. Flowerdew arrived and Dickie rushed back to the door to announce them.

Mrs. Flowerdew was flushed, bright-eyed and almost speechless with excitement. They seated her near the fire and offered roast chestnuts which were smoking gently on the edge of the stone hearth where Macbeth, with Christmas ribbon round his shaggy neck, slumbered peacefully. Mrs. Warrender and the Wilsons were placed firmly in the other chairs and Penny and Peter sat at their feet on cushions, while David, Jon and the twins waited on them.

After about ten minutes Penny, looking flushed and pretty, jumped up and said:

"We just want to say how wonderful it is to have Mrs. Flowerdew here with us safe and well after her adventures. And James, of course, because he keeps cropping up in my life, and especially tonight and for always because he's brought Judith for the first time to the Dolphin. Then, of course, none of us would be here if it wasn't for Jon's mother who gave us this room and leaves it for us to manage, and who is always more welcome than anybody... That's almost all I wanted to say except that we can't wait much longer to hear what James has to tell us because we know he's been talking to policemen and detectives, and if Mrs. Flowerdew doesn't mind, we want to hear about her treasure. So could we eat and drink and talk at the same time?"

So they formed a big half circle round the fire, and Mrs. Warrender asked James if he would tell them what had happened during the day.

"I don't want to spoil the evening by talking about unpleasant people, and anyway what we all really want is to honour Mrs. Flowerdew and ask her to show us the treasure found by the quite inimitable twins," he began. "So let's be done with the 'baddies' as soon as possible. The real villains are Mrs. Baxter and the man who calls himself 'Purvis'. Apparently the police haven't anything against the woman, except the abduction, but they certainly don't like Purvis which is not his name and neither is he an American citizen. It seems he is a notorious receiver of stolen goods, and probably has been responsible for smuggling out of Britain into the United States a lot of

jewellery, valuable books and manuscripts and even pictures. His claim to be a collector of such is true enough, and the police told me that some of the small stolen treasures which come to him are sent abroad through the post in parcels of books - much safer than trying to get them through Customs hidden on his person. He forces others to steal for him over here - "

"Like Mr. Royal, I suppose?" Penny interrupted.

"Yes. I'm just coming to him. Purvis would get people like Royal to pack and post stolen goods to various addresses in America and he would then go over and collect the parcels himself and dispose of the contents. How long he has known Mrs. Baxter and whether she is his sister I don't know, but she is obviously now one of his agents and works closely with him. Apparently there was a Mr. Peregrine Baxter who died about a year ago. That's all I know except that they were caught at Gatwick Airport this morning. The car in which they escaped was wrecked in the snow, and they are now what is known as 'helping the police with their enquiries'. I don't know what has happened to the unpleasant manservant... Now I must tell you about Mr. Royal."

"I bet that's not his name either," Jon said. "I never really trusted that chap. Not my type. How is he anyway?"

"Not too bad, I'm told. Still in hospital but well enough to make a statement to the police. Jon's right about his name and he's got what the police call 'a record', although he may have been trying to go straight until Purvis found him and started to blackmail him into working for him. By the way, Mrs. Flowerdew, it was Royal who broke into your house on Rye Fawkes night. He said he borrowed an Indian head-dress as a disguise and was nearly caught trying to unlock the outside door of his own cellar. Funny chap, and apparently very upset about the whole affair. I don't know what will happen to him but I shouldn't think his shop will open again under the old management... Now let's ask Mrs. Flowerdew to show us the treasure and tell us about it. Judith knows a lot about this sort of thing. She's seen it and is sure that it's valuable and would have been a real prize for Purvis... May we see it again please, Mrs. Flowerdew?"

From her bag the old lady produced the aluminium tube and handed it to Judith.

"Please tell the others what you think, my dear. You have seen my husband's translation, but before you do so I would like to tell you all myself why my husband was so secretive about this. He left me a private letter with the document which explains almost everything, although I must confess I was never as interested as I should have been in his work. It seems that he bought this document some years ago, and after he had done so he was troubled by fears that it might have been stolen. He does not say what proof he had of this, but he hid the document where the twins found it and began to make discreet enquiries. Some months ago he received proof, which I now have, that he had a right to the document which he has passed to me. Now Judith, if I may call you by your Christian name, please tell us all what you told me this afternoon."

Judith smiled and took out the precious document, which consisted of six pages, each about eight inches wide and fourteen inches deep. The writing was neat, with some flourishes and thick down and cross strokes. Each page had a wide margin of at least one and a half inches. The ink which had been black was turning brown with age.

"This is really a wonderful document," Judith explained. "Not only because it was written nearly four hundred years ago but because it's on paper and not parchment. You can see how white the paper is and if you hold it up to the light, Jon, you can see the watermarks in it - vertical lines and what looks like the outline of a jug although I've no idea what that means. It's written in French, which I don't fully understand, but Dr. Flowerdew enclosed a translation. I won't read it all now unless you want me to do so but I can tell you the story of it."

"Tell the story first, please," Mary said. "And tell us who wrote it."

"It is written by a Frenchman called Claude Toller and is an account of Queen Elizabeth's visit to Rye in the summer of 1573. Dr. Flowerdew thought that this man was so impressed by what he had seen, that he wrote it either as a record for his children or to send back to France one day."

"Who is this Claude?" David asked. "I'm not so good on dates but 1572 rings a distant bell. Do you mean that this chap might have been a Protestant refugee after the massacre on St. Bartholomew's Day in France? I suppose many refugees fled to England and Rye would be as good a refuge as any."

"That's who he was and all we know of him, but one of Rye's historians confirms that the first refugees reached Rye from Dieppe in 1572. Actually Tollier doesn't tell us anything scandalous about the Queen's visit or anything that hasn't been told before either in Holloway's *History of Rye* in which Dr. Flowerdew left his last message, or another book ("*A New History of Rye*" by Leopold Vidler (Combridges, Hove, 1932).) which I found in his library this afternoon. What makes Tollier's story interesting is his enthusiasm for Her Majesty and for the Ryers who gave him shelter from persecution and enabled him to share in the royal visit. She stayed here three days and, oddly enough, Tollier doesn't say where. Neither is he very strong on what she wore and what she looked like. I wish he had been, because at this time she was only forty. While she was here she visited Winchelsea which she called 'Little London' and it was before she left for Dover that she dubbed this little town Rye Royal - a name which has fortunately stuck. He also tells us that before she left, the Mayor of Rye, one Henry Gaymer, presented to her on bended knee 'one hundred golden angels in a purse'. Sorry I don't know how much an angel was worth but maybe that's why you're 'Royal' down here... There are some other amusing details of the visit, but perhaps Mrs. Flowerdew would allow us all to have her husband's translation copied? And I suppose my news-gathering husband would like to photograph the pages in Claude Tollier's handwriting... I've talked too long and so please may I have a drink, Jon?"

Judith put the papers back in the container and passed it to Mrs. Flowerdew who was obviously enjoying her party immensely. Before she could say anything, however, there was a firm knock on the door and Fred Vasson came in.

"I beg pardon, madam, but there is an urgent telephone call and I am to say that it concerns Miss Penny also. Will you please both come at once."

Penny, suddenly terrified of bad news, gave Jon an anguished look before hurrying out with Mrs. Warrender and as the door closed the party died with a whimper. The twins fussed over Macbeth and munched roast chestnuts to disguise their anxiety while James and Judith discussed the document with David, and it was a long five minutes before the door was flung open again by a radiant and excited Penny.

"It's my parents, Jon! They're nearly here! They're on the way from London in a hired car. They've come two days early to be with us on Christmas Day and they'll be here in half an hour."

Although the spirit of the party was saved, it began to break up when the Wilsons tactfully retired from what was now going to be a family affair. Mrs. Warrender returned for a few minutes and begged Mrs. Flowerdew to excuse her and to stay where she was until some of the others could take her home. The twins, who had once met Penny's parents (*Saucers Over the Moor*), went off to find Vasson and to beg from him two sheets of paper and cardboard large enough to make what Mary called "Banners of Welcome".

While they were working on these, Mrs. Flowerdew went over to Peter and David who were standing by the fire, not quite sure what to do.

"I was going to try and make a little 'Thank you' speech before we had this exciting news," she said as she held her hands to the flames. "Now I can make it to you two and you can pass it on. I want you all to know how grateful I am for the friendship that all you young people have shown to me. I have been lonely for so long that only now am I beginning to realize what I have missed. It is wonderful for Penelope to have her parents home in time for Christmas Day and to have so much more than she expected to make her happy. It is wonderful for me to see you all so happy, and if you will permit an old lady, I would like to wish you two a very happy Christmas and many, many more happy days and weeks and years together. God bless you both."

Peter blushed with pleasure and put her arms round her, and David was just wondering whether he dared to kiss the old lady under the mistletoe when Jon and Penny came back.

"Awful of us to desert you," the latter gasped. "Forgive us please, Mrs. Flowerdew, but suddenly there's so much to do. Tomorrow we shall bring my parents to see you and of course you will spend Christmas Day with us here. We had already planned to ask you tonight and my aunt has just reminded me. She insists. We all insist, and when my parents know all about you they will insist... Now Jon and I are going to take you home and see that your fire is stoked up and your room is warm, and anyway we shall be sleeping in your house tonight as usual... Come with us, David and Peter. I can't lose you now. Don't go away."

So the four elder ones took her home and then, well wrapped up, they sat together on the wall outside the hotel as they had so often done. The sky was blazing with stars and a three-quarter moon hung over Winchelsea, Rye's sister Cinque Port, two miles to the west. There were lights down at Rye harbour and friendly lights in the windows of the Dolphin and in the houses lower down Trader's Street, and away on the horizon to the south-east the new light-house at Dungeness flashed its warning.

They sat in companionable silence with their arms round each other. Jon could feel Penny trembling against him. He tried to understand how she was feeling but could not find the words. Suddenly a big car with headlights dipped turned into Trader's Street and came slowly towards them. Penny turned to Jon, clung to him and kissed him impetuously.

"Stay with me, Jon. I want you to be with me," and as they walked hand in hand across the cobbles to meet her parents, Mrs. Warrender and the twins stepped on to the pavement from the Dolphin. There were a few moments of confusion as the "welcome banners", reading respectively "Welcome Home" and, surprisingly, "God Save England and ye Dolphin in ye Towne of Rye," were unfurled.

David and Peter suddenly found themselves alone. Nobody was looking at them as she pressed her cold cheek to his.

"Do you like Rye Royal better now?" he whispered. "When I first met the others and sat on this very wall I wished you were with me. Remember that I wrote and told you the others would like you to join the Club?"

Remember? I want you to like Rye too. Wherever we are together I'd like to think we'd come back here one day."

She raised her hand to his face and touched it softly.

"We will come here again, David. I do like it, but I'm sure it's something to do with you!"

The author hopes that you have enjoyed this story and would like to know what you think of it. You can write to him and he will answer your letter, which should be addressed to:

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